JULY

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by PHILIP KETCHUM

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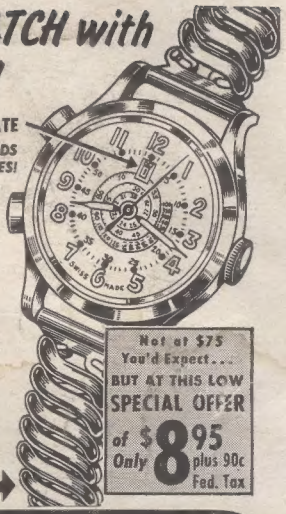

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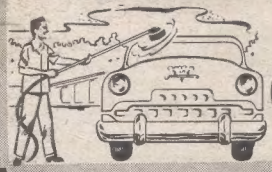

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NEW WESTERN MAGAZINE

25c

Vol. 26, No. 2 CONTENTS July, 1953

THREE BIG NOVELETTES

GUNS OF DISHONOR ..... William Heuman 10
Quale had traded his honor for guns, his country for a renegade's pride—and this was the final bargain: The blood of an innocent wagon train—for the life of a man who had sworn to hunt him down!

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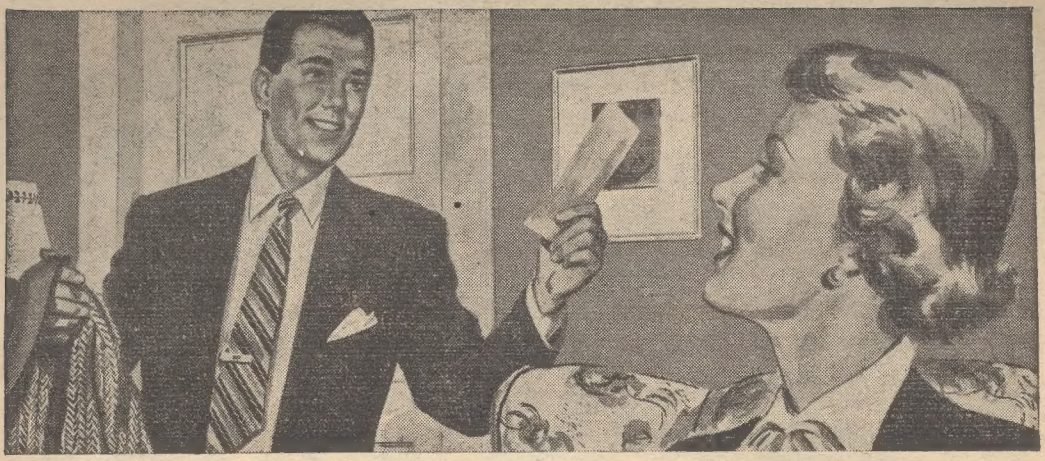

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THE STRAWBOSS

THE first recorded battle against "inflation" in California occurred in the year of 1850, in the mining town of Volcano, a roaring gold camp of the Mother Lode country. At that time, would-be miners were storming into the gold-laden Mother Lode Country over Carson Pass, and the town of Volcano was about the first stopping place.

Saloons ran wide open. Eight feet below the surface of the ground gold was so thick a man could pick it up in his fingers. At first, there was only one saloon, and the owner, upon finishing the frame building, announced drinks would be sold at a high price.

Miners promptly rebelled.

"Wait'll he gets started into business," one of the more practical heads reasoned. "Then, when he gits his prices posted, an' if they is too high—well, we'll see he lowers 'em right pronto."

The saloon man heard about this. "They cain't do nothin' to me," he said belligerently, as he polished his wooden bar. "They'll pay the prices I ask or go dry, an' who ever seen a miner with a dusty throat?"

This implication was correct in every sense. The mining clan consisted of men from all over the world. They had sailed around the Horn, some had walked across Panama to get a boat on the west side, others had dared redskins and death across the plains, all lured by the yellow metal—gold!

They drank, and drank plenty.

The day came when the saloon was ready for business. The long bar, made of native pine, glistened; the new cuspidors, transported from Boston, were shiny and inviting; behind the bar were rows upon rows of bottles; glasses were polished and ready for unshaven lips. And the cash box, too, was ready.

"Here they come," a barkeeper hollered to the proprietor.

Miners surged in. Booted, whiskered, dirty. Hands rough from work with shovel, pick, and sluice box. With pokes jammed with nuggets and dust.

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

"How much a drink, barkeep?"

"Two bucks."

"Two dollars! Heck, a drink over in Hangtown is only a buck, an' thet's the standard price all through the diggin's!"

"Two dollars, sir."

The miners roared in anger. The proprietor, billy-club in hand, hastened out of his office, a cupola on the end of the long saloon. He was belligerent and tough and angry.

"What's the matter here?" he demanded.

The miners had a pre-arranged spokesman. "Yore prices is twice as high as they should be. Whiskey sells for a buck a toss, not two bucks."

"You pay two dollars here, savvy?"

"You're a heap wrong," a miner yelped. "We pay one buck a drink or we pay nothin'!"

"Git him," a man ordered.

At this point, some other miners came in, carrying long pine poles. Despite the agonized hollering of the owner, now held by two miners, the men poked a hole in the new roof.

"Hey, men, don't—"

"You lower your prices, eh?"

"Two bucks a drink. Don't poke a hole in my roof— Hey, what do you aim to do, anyway?"

"You'll see."

The men poked a hole about four feet in diameter. One said, "Thet's big enough. Bring the boss over here, eh?"

They dragged the owner over. With the aid of grinning miners, the man was tied between two poles; then boosted skyward. Ropes bound him to the poles but he could kick his legs and this he did as he slowly went through the hole and was deposited on the top of the roof he had so laboriously built.

"Hey, hey, you men— You cain't do this to me—"

"We're doin' it," a miner grunted, grinning widely. "Nobody is raisin' his prices too high in Volcano town. You stay up there, fellow, until you agree to sell drinks at a buck a toss, an' you come down only after you make the promise."

The owner could do nothing. All he could do was look downward through the hole and watch his liquor stock disappear down whiskery and dry throats. A few miners, smiling widely, wrapped towels around their middles, leaped over the bar, and became "bartenders."

Free drinks were served. The proprietor glared down, a stubborn, angry man. Whisky left barrels. New barrels were rolled in. They were boosted on racks, the bungs were knocked out, spigots were jammed in. Horny hands turned the spigots and liquor flowered into glasses and cups.

The owner groaned. But still, it took him an hour to consent to lower prices. By that time he had lost much of his stock.

"I'll lower my prices to a buck," he promised.

"Pull him down," a man ordered. "He's mebbe learnt his lesson. If he raises prices again we tar an' feather him an' run him out on a rail." He winked at another miner, and the proprietor did not see the wink. He was too glad to be on the ground again. He had learned his lesson.

Getting free, he went behind the bar, smiling widely. "Belly up, fellas," he hollered, " 'cause the first drinks are free."

"And what is the price from then on?" a man demanded.

"A buck a drink, men. Jes' a single buck— Get the gold scales, Shorty, an' git to work."

So ended the Mother Lode's fight against inflation.

* * *

The editors of *NEW WESTERN MAGAZINE,* however, are all FOR inflation, as far as regards the fact and fiction contents of this magazine. We'll look forward to being with you again on June 26th!

The Editors

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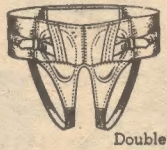

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GUNS OF

By WILLIAM HEUMAN

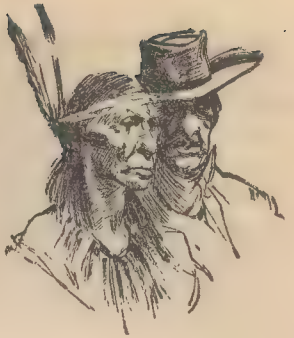
Quale had traded his honor for guns, his country for a renegade's pride—and this was the final bargain: The blood of an innocent wagon train—for the life of a man who had sworn to hunt him down!

THE MAN opposite Lieutenant Owen Hill in the rattling, bouncing Concord coach had a gray face, a gray mustache, gray eyes. He sat at the window, staring out at the drab, treeless plains, apparently oblivious to the dust which for the past four hours had been settling on his black frock coat and flat-crowned black hat. He wore a string tie. His linen was clean and his boots, when he'd first entered the coach at Lebanon Station, had been polished.

From his neatness Owen Hill suspected a military background, betrayed also in his erect carriage. Once Owen had seen him standing by one of the stone corrals

They sat astride their horses, staring at that bright ball of light—the reflection of the sun on a tiny mirror. . . .

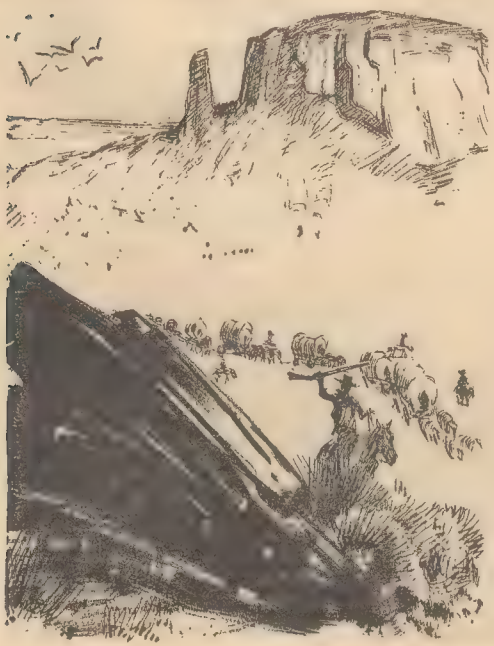
DISHONOR



at a swing station, looking over the horses with a cavalryman's interest.

Twice on the long run from Lebanon Station to Deadwood, Owen had tried to engage the man in conversation, and both times the tall man with the gray mustache had been polite, courteous, and unresponsive. He'd admitted that he was going to Deadwood; he admitted that he'd been East, and that was all Owen could get out of him.

There were two other passengers in the coach, two drummers, heading for Deadwood. They'd been garrulous, but they'd gotten nowhere with the gray man. On one occasion he'd stopped one of the drummers with a steady, piercing, contemptuous look, after a funny joke. There had been no more jokes after that, and very little conversation. Both drummers were sound asleep, and the man with the gray mustache continued to stare out the window.



His eyes were hard, bitter; this was a harsh and a ruthless man, with no joy in him.

Owen said casually, "Expect to stay long in Deadwood, sir?"

He was in civilian clothes, and he wished after saying it that he'd not added the "sir." When he had gotten off the steamer at St. Joseph, returning to his post at Fort Stanton, Indian Territory, after a three-month furlough back East, there had been a mysterious wire for him from Colonel Avery at Stanton. He was to proceed to Deadwood in civilian clothes, meeting Captain Malloy in the Jackson Hotel where he would be given further instructions. He was to keep his identity as an Army officer concealed. Addressing a man as "sir" might enable an astute observer to connect him with the Army.

The man in the black frock coat turned to look at Owen, and Owen could see the tiny red veins in those gray eyes. Some small anger was revealed there, too.

He said, "I have made no definite plans, young man."

Owen took out a cigar and bit off the end. On second thought he took another cigar from his vest pocket and extended it to the man opposite him. It was a gesture intended to open the conversation, but the gray man shook his head.

"I do not smoke," he said.

Owen put the cigar back in his pocket. He lit up his own and sat there looking out the window, wondering again about that strange telegram from the commanding

officer at Stanton. He had no doubt that his mission was out of the ordinary. The secrecy surrounding it smacked of the unusual, even for intelligence work.

The big Concord swung into another station, horses puffing. The driver tossed the reins down to a waiting attendant and then leaped from the seat himself. The coach doors banged open and the four passengers descended to stretch their legs.

Owen sauntered toward the corrals and stood there, looking at a big bay animal inside. He was turning around, starting back toward the coach when he heard the muffled oaths from inside the stable where a hostler was coming out with a team of chestnuts for the coach.

The new team was young, probably newly-broken, and they were nervous. Owen watched the hostler, a husky, yellow-haired man, obviously quite drunk, yank at their heads and curse them viciously as he came out of the stable.

As the chestnuts reared nervously, he smashed one of them across the face with his fist, jerking the bit cruelly. Owen started forward, mouth tight, anger blazing in his brown eyes.

He was too late. The tall man in the black frock coat had stepped forward, jerked the hostler around, and slashed him across the face with his open hand.

The hostler released the horses and staggered back, animal rage distorting his face. Owen saw the knife coming out of his belt and cried a warning, at the same time reaching for the Army Colt he carried inside his coat.

The gray man had seen that knife coming out, too, and had drawn his gun. Under similar circumstances, Owen Hill would have threatened the drunken man with the gun, making him drop the knife, or at worst he would have tried to put a bullet through his arm or leg, stopping him.

The tall man did neither. Coolly, calmly, he sent a bullet through the drunken man's chest, and then as the hostler started to sag, the gray man fired twice more, both bullets kicking dust from the hostler's vest, both of them deadly.

The hostler twisted around as he fell, and was dead when his body hit the ground. He lay there, arms sprawled, staring up into the hot afternoon sky.

THE stage driver had been inside the stone hut. He'd burst out at the sound of the shots and now stood looking at the dead hostler on the ground, looking at the man in black who'd fired the shots. His mouth was open, slack. There was a kind of horror in his eyes. This man had seen death in many forms on the frontier, but never anything as cold-blooded as this.

Owen was walking forward slowly, putting his own gun out of sight, when the tall man suddenly turned and started toward the coach. There was utterly no expression on his face, neither anger, nor regret.

Lieutenant Owen Hill looked down at the three spent cartridge shells gleaming in the sun. He watched the other attendant come up slowly and examine the body. The man looked at Owen, moistened his lips, and shook his head dazedly. Death had struck very swiftly here in the bright sunshine.

The two drummers watched, stupefied, as the gray man opened the door and took his accustomed seat by the window.

As the driver walked past Owen, he said softly, "Hell's bells!"

They left the station in five minutes, Owen back in his seat opposite the gray man. The two drummers had been dazed into silence now. They sat on the other side of the coach, looking at each other, glancing apprehensively at the man at the window.

Owen had picked up one of the cartridge shells and was holding it in his hand, toying with it, as the stage rolled away from the little station. The shell was from a Colt .44.

He looked down at the shell and said casually, "Drink can get a man into a lot of trouble."

The man in the black coat looked at him, inclined his head slightly in reply, and then looked out the window again. Owen tossed the shell through the window and relaxed against the cushion.

It was five o'clock in the afternoon when they rolled into Deadwood. The station was directly opposite the Jackson Hotel, and as they were coming in Owen spotted Lieutenant Gardner Smith standing on the porch, smoking a cigar.

Smith, a tall, lean man, made no motion to come over when he saw Owen step out of the coach. He smoked his cigar and watched the two drummers cross the street to the hotel. He looked curiously at the gray man, who'd taken a carpet bag from the rear boot of the coach and started toward the hotel, also.

Owen's bag was on the roof of the coach and he had to wait until it was tossed down by an attendant. When he finally started across the road, he saw Smith look at him and then look away. It was a sign.

As Owen walked past him on the deserted porch, the lieutenant was studying his half-smoked cigar intently.

His lips moved very slightly, and he said, "Number Eleven."

Owen went into the lobby and crossed to the desk. He'd noticed that the gray man had by-passed the Jackson Hotel and was walking north up the main street.

Signing the register at the desk, Owen picked up his key and started for the narrow flight of stairs which led to the second floor. The number on the key was 6. Room Eleven was a few doors down the hall.

Opening the door of Six, Owen dropped his bag on the floor and stood there for a few moments, staring at it. The room was small and meagerly furnished. He heard footsteps in the hall, and when they died away he opened the door and stepped outside. He caught a glimpse of Lieutenant Smith disappearing through a doorway at the far end of the corridor.

The door was slightly ajar when Owen reached it. It swung open wide at his light knock and he stepped inside. The door was shut behind him, and locked.

A short, black-mustached man in the blue uniform of a captain of cavalry, got up from a chair and came across the room, smiling, hand outstretched. Captain Malloy of Fort Stanton said warmly, "Glad to see you, Owen. I saw your stage coming in."

Owen returned the handshake and then greeted Lieutenant Smith. He said, "That stage whisper, Gardner, could have been heard half block away."

Smith grinned and slapped his back.

Captain Malloy said, "We've been waiting three days for you, Owen. We're anxious to get back to the post, and I know you're anxious to start on your mission."

"My mission?"

Captain Malloy sat down and signaled for Owen to take the other chair in the room. Lieutenant Smith leaned against the door, hands in his pockets.

Malloy said, "Since you've been gone East this summer, Owen, we've been having a little trouble up along the new wagon route across Montana to the goldfields and to Oregon."

"Indian trouble?" Owen asked.

"You might call it that," Captain Malloy said evenly, "although we're not sure the Indians are entirely to blame for it. Two outfits were wiped out in early June, and another last month. The first two were small, less than twenty-five wagons in the groups, but the last outfit was large, sixty wagons, over a hundred men."

Owen whistled softly. He said, "The Sioux don't usually attack a band of a hundred armed white men."

"We don't believe the Sioux are behind these raids," Malloy said. "It is the opin-

ion of Colonel Avery that a white man has organized a band of renegade Indians and outlawed white men who are worse than the Indians. They have a hideout somewhere in the Crow River country north of the new wagon trail, and they're ready to pounce on every outfit coming through."

"And a white man is behind it?"

"Not only a white man," Captain Malloy said slowly, "but we have reason to believe a former major in the United States Cavalry."

Owen stared at the man in astonishment.

"Ex-Major Edward Quale," Malloy continued grimly, "court-martialed four years ago for his disgraceful conduct in a campaign against the Kiowas."

"The name," Owen murmured, "is familiar."

HE WAS trying to remember the details of that sordid campaign which had taken place far to the south of Fort Stanton. Quale had been in command of a regiment of cavalry and foot soldiers which had attacked a peaceful band of Arapahoes crossing Kiowa country. The attack had been entirely unprovoked as the Araphoes were a peaceful nation at the time.

Quale had hit them at a place later to be called Bloody Creek. He had massacred the entire band, men, women and children, ordering his sickened men to shoot the Indians down without mercy.

The War Department had been castigated for this deed. From every quarter in the country the cry had come to withdraw the cavalry from the frontier.

"Edward Quale was cashiered from the army," Captain Malloy was saying, "and the last report anyone had of him he was going West. There have been rumors this summer of a strange band up in Montana Territory. They are part Indian and part white, and probaby the roughest men in the country. They are murderers, cutthroats, outcasts from the Indian nations and from civilization. They've been organized into a hard-riding unit equivalent to a cavalry regiment."

Lieutenant Smith spoke from the door. "There have been rumors," he stated, "that they employ cavalry tactics in their raids. They have been disciplined to ride like troopers, and from a distance you can't tell them apart from a cavalry troop."

"I believe that," Captain Malloy said. "Edward Quale was recognized as one of the finest drillmasters in the army at the time of his dismissal. If he is behind this band of devils, I believe they are as well drilled as any troop of men at Fort Stanton."

Owen Hill stared at the two men. "It—it's almost inconceivable."

"I have never met Edward Quale," Malloy said, "but I've spoken to men who knew him. They claimed that he hated all Indians, and that when the army broke him that hatred was transferred to his own kind. He has a terrible pride, and it will not let him rest until he has exacted his own kind of vengeance."

"Has Colonel Avery made any attempt to catch him?" Owen wanted to know.

Captain Malloy nodded. "We've had troops searching for him in the Crow River country, but it's rough territory. Quale evidently knows every foot of it, and he can live off the land. Our troopers had to carry their own supplies, and when the supplies ran low they had to turn back. I believe Quale was keeping out of our way on that occasion because he is not properly armed as yet. When he has sufficient firepower to match our cavalry, he'll tackle any troop sent out to meet him."

Owen frowned. He asked, "How many of the wagon trains headed for the goldfields and for Oregon have been held up?"

Captain Malloy smiled. "Too many—and here's your mission. There's a big outfit, consisting of nearly eighty wagons

and about a hundred and fifty men, ready to leave Deadwood within a day or so. Colonel Avery wants you to accompany them, posing as a prospective miner in the Montana goldfields."

Owen lifted his eyebrows. "Do you think Quale will hit at an outfit that size?" he asked.

"The colonel doesn't think so," Malloy explained, "but the train will be passing through the Crow River country, and Quale's men will be watching it, probably running off whatever stock they can get. At any rate they'll be in the vicinity of the train and they won't be running away as they have been doing whenever a body of troopers come into sight." He paused and looked at Owen carefully. He said, "Your mission is to leave the train at your discretion, follow the trail of some of Quale's men, and locate their hiding place. When we know that, a flying column will be sent out from Stanton immediately to smash them."

"I've never been up in the Crow River country," Owen said. "I might have a little trouble finding my way back out again."

"Charlie Barrett will be going with you," Malloy said. "He's already signed up with the outfit, and you'll find him down at their camp."

Owen nodded his approval. Barrett was one of the company scouts, an experienced, dependable man.

"You are not to reveal your identity to anyone," Captain Malloy went on. "The colonel is of the opinion that Quale sends spies along with each outfit leaving Deadwood and the other jump-off spots. Your life will be in jeopardy every moment if it is discovered by anyone that you are an Army officer."

"I understand," Owen said.

Captain Malloy stood up and held out his hand. He said, "On behalf of the company I wish you the best of luck, Owen. Be careful."

AFTER supper, Owen walked to the edge of town where the big Conestoga wagons were drawn up.

It was dark now, but the white-topped wagons could be clearly seen against the glow of numerous campfires. Women bustled around the fires, preparing the evening meal. Dogs and children raced in and out among the wagons, screaming, playing games. A blacksmith was shoeing horses near one wagon, his hammer raising showers of sparks against the darkness of the night.

By firelight, men were still working on wagons, preparing them for the big jump across the plains. Many of them had come up from St. Joseph and from other points along the Missouri, meeting here for the more dangerous portion of their journey to the coast. Their wagons had aready come across some rough country and repairs were in order.

Owen stood in the shadows for a few moments, watching the scene. It was a big outfit, one which ordinarily would encounter little Indian trouble. There was no certainty now that they would go across unscathed.

A group of screeching children raced around one of the wagons, passing within a few feet of Owen. He started forward, stepping around a wagon tongue, and a girl ran full into him. She was laughing and breathless, evidently having been playing with the children. She stopped now, and gasped her apologies.

Owen could see her face in the dim light. She was pretty, quite young. He was still holding her arm because she'd nearly fallen after bumping into him.

He released her now and said, "I could've been a Sioux Indian in full warpaint and feathers."

"I've never seen a Sioux in warpaint!" She laughed merrily. "You don't look like one."

"In the daylight," Owen said, "I am uglier than any savage."

Again came that light, tinkling laugh, and it was a symbol of this wagon train. They were confident, anticipating no trouble.

"I should like to see you in the daylight," the girl chuckled.

"I shall be available," Owen Hill told her, "under those circumstances, from dawn till dusk."

She laughed again, and then the two children scampered back, and she ran off with them.

Owen called after her, "I'll have to know your name when we meet the next time."

She was already around the wagon, but her voice drifted to him, clear and distinct: "Lucy Munroe."

He walked on, smiling a little, and then saw the man standing in the firelight near one of the wagons, facing a plank of wood which he'd stood up against a wagon wheel. Owen could see the crude figure of a man drawn on the plank, just the outline, and two knifes had been hurled into the throat of the figure. They protruded, one of them still quivering.

As he watched, the man facing the plank raised his right hand and threw again. The sharp-bladed hunting knife struck the plank with a thud and quivered there. It was in the throat for the third time.

The knife-thrower was tall and lean, and as he walked forward to retrieve the three knives, there was a stoop to him. He had long, gangling arms and tremendous hands, protruding from the sleeves of his short jacket.

Moving up casually, Owen sat down on the tongue of the wagon. He watched the knife-thrower step back a dozen feet from the plank and hurl the three knives into the throat again.

When he retrieved the knives next, he saw Owen and nodded. Owen got the first good glimpse of his face in the light from one of the fires. It was a thin, aquiline face, sharp-nosed with a wide, thin-lipped mouth. The eyes were wide, staring, not the eyes of a man who is completely sane.

Owen said casually, "I saw a Mexican handle a knife like that once, but never a white man."

"In the throat," the thin man mumbled, "always in the throat, and that's too good for him."

Owen said, "It's too good for whom, friend?"

"Quale," the thin man said malevolently. "Him—the devil!" He threw another knife and this one missed the throat by a fraction of an inch. He cursed himself savagely for the miss.

"You know Quale?" Owen asked him curiously.

"Killed my two brothers last spring," the thin man said. "I'll know him when I see him. It'll be in the throat—always in the throat. A bullet is too easy. I want him to die the hard way. I want him to die screaming with knives in his throat."

In spite of himself Owen shuddered a little.

A short, thick-set man with a beard came over from one of the fires. He said to the knife-thrower, "Have a cup of coffee, Hawkes. Put those knives away for a while."

It was the voice of a sane man who speaks to one mentally ill. The bearded man saw Owen then, and nodded.

He said, "Hawkes here is quite a knife-thrower."

"That's true." Owen smiled. He stood up. "Who is the wagon captain here, friend?"

The bearded man hooked his thumbs in his belt and looked steadily at Owen. He said, "Reckon I'm the man you're lookin' for, mister. Name's Hodgson. Eph Hodgson."

"I'd like to go along with this outfit," Owen said. "I'll provide my own horse and guns. I'll pay someone to pack my supplies in his wagon."

Hodgson nodded. "Glad to have you," he said heartily. "We need all the men

we can get. I understand they've been givin' the wagon trains a pretty tough time this summer. There's talk that a man named Quale is behind these raids. He's supposed to be a white renegade."

"I've heard the name," Owen murmured.

Eph Hodgson studied him thoughtfully. "Goin' to the goldfields?" he asked, "or movin' out with us to Oregon?"

Owen shrugged. "Just drifting," he stated. "No real plans yet."

Hodgson grinned. "Damned country is full of 'em like you," he said. "Come along, Hawkes. That coffee's waitin'."

Hawkes trailed after the short man, leaving his three knifes embedded in the plank. Owen Hill looked at them for a few moments in silence, and then went back to town.

CHAPTER TWO

Tomorrow's Bullets

IN THE big Diamond Head Saloon, Owen found the army scout, Charlie Barrett, bellied up against the bar, drinking alone. Barrett was a small, wiry man in buckskins. He had an arrow crease across his right cheekbone, the scar of which had pulled his face out of shape. He looked at Owen in the bar mirror, speculation in his pale blue eyes.

Owen drawled, "Reckon your name is Barrett, mister?"

Barrett smiled faintly. He said, "I was wonderin' how in hell you was goin' to hide that West Point accent. You'll do, Lieutenant."

Owen ordered a drink. He said, "I just signed up with Hodgson down at the camp. When do they expect to pull out?"

"Day after tomorrow," Barrett told him. He scratched his jaw and said, "Saw your stage pull in this afternoon. Didn't like the looks o' that gent ridin' with you."

Owen set his glass down. He knew Barrett wasn't referring to the two drummers.

"Don't know as I liked him, myself," Owen smiled. Briefly, he related the details of the killing. Barrett's eyes widened a little as he listened.

"Pretty tough hombre," he said softly. "Goin' by the name o' Samuels in this town. You'll find him at the card table over agin the wall."

Owen turned leisurely. He spotted the man he'd ridden with in the coach sitting at a card table with three other men. He had his face half-turned to the bar.

Owen said, "So his name is Samuels. What do you know about him, Charlie?"

The little scout fingered his liquor glass. "He's goin' West with our outfit," he stated. "He signed up with Hodgson this afternoon."

Owen frowned. Samuels was no miner; he was certainly no farmer, heading for the rich Oregon territory, and he did not appear to be a professional gambler.

Owen said, "Why would he be going West, Charlie?"

Charlie Barrett usually knew the answers. The little man could circulate through a crowd, and before he was finished he'd heard more than any ten men put together. He didn't have the answer now.

He said, "You guess an' I'll guess, Lieutenant. He's a queer one. Haven't figured him yet."

"Who's the young fellow at his table?" Owen asked next.

Without turning his head to look, Barrett said, "Young George Munroe. Goin' with our outfit. Bought a gun when he hit this town an' thinks he's Bill Hickok."

"Munroe?" Owen murmured. He was thinking that the girl's name had been Munroe, too, and he wondered if they were related. George Munroe was about seventeen or eighteen. He was in high spirits, and Owen saw the reason why. He had a good stack of chips at his elbow, and he was apparently making out pretty well in the game.

"For a green kid," Owen said, "he's doing well for himself in that game, Charlie."

Barrett sniffed. "His luck will run out," he commented, "or they'll start dealin' 'em off the bottom—one way or the other that kid will walk out o' here cleaned tonight. I don't like the looks o' them two gents with Samuels."

Owen noticed the pair for the first time. They were rough-looking men, with the stamp of the Border on them. The man on Samuels's left was swarthy-skinned, with small, deep-set black eyes.

The other man was smaller, a pig-eyed man with a purplish nose, and ash-colored hair. He kept looking at George Munroe, glancing at the pile of chips in front of the young man, and then grinning slyly.

Charlie Barrett said casually, "Dark man is French Joe, an' the little feller is Asa Simms. They're settin' that boy up."

Owen frowned. "Samuels in with them?" he asked.

The scout shrugged. "That gent's mind is a thousand miles away," he said. "Reckon he don't even know he's playin' cards."

It was true. Samuels looked at his cards and then stared into space. Owen was positive that if the man had drawn four aces he would have felt no elation.

Charlie Barrett said, "Hate to see that boy, Munroe, git into trouble, Owen. His sister will be worried stiff."

"I believe I've met his sister," Owen said. "They headed for Oregon?"

"Goldfields," Barrett said. "Two of 'em are travelin' together. I hear their uncle hit it rich in the fields an' asked 'em to come out."

"He won't get there," Owen said, "if he carries that big gun and doesn't know how to use it."

The trouble started ten minutes later. George Munroe's pile of chips had started to dwindle, and watching the game from the bar, Owen distinctly saw Asa Simms slip cards off the bottom of the deck. It was the crudest form of card cheating, and yet George Munroe didn't seem to notice it.

Charlie Barrett said with a yawn, "They'll have him cleaned in another hour, Owen."

"No," Owen murmured, "I don't think they will." He started across the floor with Barrett at his elbow.

Owen reached the table, smiling pleasantly, but there was a glint in his brown eyes.

He asked the young man, "Your name Munroe?"

The boy looked up at him. He said steadily, "That's right, sir."

"Play cards very much?" Owen asked him next.

The boy flushed. "What does that mean?"

"This gentleman," Owen nodded toward Simms, "has been dealing from the bottom of the deck for the past fifteen minutes. You didn't appear to notice it."

ASA SIMMS leapt to his feet. He placed both hands flat on the table and glared at Owen. His voice was taut as he spoke. "When a man talks like that, mister, he'd better have a gun on him."

"I have one," Owen said softly. He was watching French Joe, too. The swarthy man was still sitting, his right below the table now, and Owen Hill realized he'd have to watch that right hand.

Charlie Barrett was circling the table, coming up behind Samuels, indicating that he could be called upon for aid. Samuels had made no move whatsoever. He sat at the table, looking at the cards in his hand, and then he glanced up at Owen, recognition coming into his eyes. There was interest and curiosity in them too, as if he were wondering why another man should perhaps risk his life in an affair which did not particularly concern him.

Asa Simms tried to bluster now, seeing that his threat had not been effectual. He

snarled, "This game's as straight as any in the house, mister. The boy's drawin' bad cards."

"You've been dealing him bad cards." Owen smiled. "You and your crooked friends here." He nodded toward French Joe, and then he saw the dark man's right hand move. That was the sign Owen had been waiting for. When the knife blade came over the top of the table, Owen had already grasped the table rim with both hands and charged forward, ramming the table into French Joe's chest, knocking him off the chair to the floor.

Charlie Barrett had stepped up quickly when the table went off. He had a gun lined on Asa Simms and he was standing behind Samuels, also. He said, "Hold it that way, Simms."

Owen went over the top of the table in a long dive, reaching for French Joe's knife hand as he fell. The Canuck was cursing as Owen grasped his wrist, pressed the back of the man's hand against the rough board floor, until the fingers released the knife.

Barrett stepped over and kicked the knife away. Owen rolled off his man and came up, still smiling. Samuels had not even gotten up from his chair. He was still sitting there, watching, ignoring Barrett's gun which was covering Asa Simms and himself.

French Joe scrambled from the floor, blood dripping from his right hand where Owen had scraped it on the floor. He aimed a terrific kick at Owen's stomach, and when he missed and swung around off balance, Owen stepped in and smashed him in the mouth, knocking him to the floor again.

Young George Munroe had gotten up when the fight started and he'd drawn his gun. It was evident that he didn't know what to do next. The crowd was gathering around the two fighters, and young Munroe was pointing the gun first at French Joe and then at Simms.

Charlie Barrett, seeing the gun, yelped hastily, "Put that damned hogleg away afore somebody gits hurt."

The boy put the gun back in the holster, and then French Joe was up again, snatching up a chair, swinging it at Owen's head. Anticipating the move, Owen was already moving when the Canuck raised the chair. He came in low and rammed his head into French Joe's stomach, driving him back against the bar through the crowd of howling spectators.

The chair broke across Owen's back, doing little damage. He heard French Joe's scream of pain as his spine came in contact with the rim of the bar.

Straightening up, Owen lashed out with both fists, hitting for French Joe's face. He kept swinging, hard, solid punches, until French Joe lay across the bar railing, his face smashed to a pulp.

Owen walked back through the crowd. He said to young Munroe, "Better cash in your chips. We'll go back to your wagon."

Samuels was standing up now, hands in his vest pocket. He said to Owen, "Was that your fight?"

"I made it mine," Owen told him.

"Some day," the gray man said slowly, "you'll make the wrong fight yours, my friend. Then what?"

"I'll look for that day," Owen stated.

Samuels shrugged and walked toward the bar, his interest gone in the matter. Owen left with Charlie Barrett and young Munroe.

The boy said uncomfortably, "I didn't mean to get you in that fight, mister."

"Why don't you save your money?" Owen asked. "You might need it before you reach your destination."

"Thought I saw a chance of making a little." The boy grinned good-naturedly. "It would have been the other way around if you hadn't stepped in." He looked at Owen curiously, and he said, "You—you're not going out with our wagon train, are you?"

Owen nodded. "I've already spoken to Hodgson," he said. "I need a wagon to stow my grub. You have room in yours?"

"Glad to have you," George Munroe said heartily. "We'll find room. Lucy—" He stopped and he said, "Did you meet my sister, sir?"

Charlie Barrett answered the question. "Offhand," the scout murmured, "I'd say he had."

OWEN met her officially ten minutes later. It was still quite early in the evening when they reached the Munroe wagon at the camp grounds. Lucy was in the wagon when they came up.

She smiled at Owen and said, "You're not as ugly as you claimed—quite."

"You see well in the dark, ma'am." Owen grinned. "I didn't think you'd recognize me."

"Mr. Hill is going with us," young George explained. "Can we find room in the wagon for his supplies and Mr. Barrett's?"

"We could use more help," Lucy smiled. "Glad to have you."

"I'll have my supplies here some time tomorrow," Owen said. "Barrett and I'll bunk under the wagon, and we'll help you with the stock as much as we can."

"Fine." George Munroe nodded. "You're in for a good trip."

Owen grimaced, and Lucy Munroe happened to be looking at him at the time. She said quickly, "Do you anticipate trouble, Mr. Hill?"

"We're across the Missouri," Owen told her. "After we leave Deadwood there is nothing but wild country all the way to the Montana goldfields. Many things can happen."

"You worried about this fellow Quale we've been hearing about?" George Munroe smiled.

"If what I hear is true," Owen observed, "we'd all better be careful on this trip." He wished fervently now that there were no women and children going along, but it was impossible to stop them now. They'd come this far, and they'd been able to organize a pretty strong party, strong enough so that very few warlike Indians would dare molest them.

At dawn the next morning the wagons started to roll. Owen rode with Charlie Barrett alongside the Munroe wagon. George Munroe drove, with Lucy on the seat beside him.

There was not too much confusion once they hit the wagon trail west. These wagons had been traveling up from the Missouri, and they'd achieved some semblance of order before reaching the last jump-off spot.

There were quite a few loose riders with the outfit, men like Owen and Barrett, not definitely connected with any of the wagons, but heading West, lured by the promise of better things beyond the horizon. Two riders were moving up along the column of wagons, going past on the opposite side of the column from which Owen and the scout were riding. Barrett saw them and grunted.

Through a gap between wagons, Owen spotted Asa Simms and French Joe. French Joe looked straight at him, his face still puffed and bruised from the beating he'd received.

Charlie Barrett said softly, "Didn't know them fellers were goin' with this outfit, Owen."

"I'd rather," Owen scowled, "that they were going with someone else, even though Hodgson can use every available gun in case of trouble."

They moved up toward the head of the column, themselves, after a while, passing a scarecrow of a figure, trudging along beside one of the wagons. The man looked neither to the right nor the left as he walked. He carried neither short arm nor rifle, but Owen Hill knew the man had three sharp knives thrust in his belt.

A dozen paces ahead of Hawkes rode Samuels. Like Hawkes, Samuels stared

straight ahead of him, riding as if he were by himself, oblivious to everything around him.

As they rode past the man, Samuels's gray eyes lingered a moment on Owen, and in that instant Owen realized he was sitting straight in the saddle, cavalry style, where the other men in this outfit slouched, careless of riding form.

Owen let his body sag a little as he went by, and heard Charlie Barrett say softly, "That gent don't miss much, Owen. He's spotted you already as a man who's been in the cavalry."

Owen shrugged. "He may have ridden with Jeb Stuart or Sheridan, himself," he said.

They moved on up to Eph Hodgson at the head of the column. Hodgson nodded to them.

"When can we expect Indian trouble, Charlie?"

Barrett shook his head. "Ain't a white man in the country knows when to expect Injuns," he reflected. "We kin put out point riders and flankers startin' tomorrow mornin', and be on the safe side."

"We've had drills on circling the wagons in case of attack," Hodgson said. "I don't think our men will crack in an Indian charge."

Owen Hill was wondering what would happen, though, if they were hit by a direct charge of one unit, and then another flanking movement—a direct cavalry charge, column of fours, slashing through one end of the wagon corral and coming out the other.

Western emigrants knew only one form of fighting on the open plains—predicated on the theory that Indians never varied their attack. It was a straight charge and a swing around the corral, moving in closer and closer all the time, and that wide circle gave every marksman in the corral plenty of targets to shoot at. It would be a different matter if a flying wedge, say four riders wide, struck the weak point.

OWEN said quietly, "I've heard stories concerning this mysterious Quale who has been hitting the caravans. They claim that he's trained his men in cavalry tactics, even getting the Indians to ride like troopers. If he hits at us when we pass through the Crow River country, we can anticipate a different kind of attack. We'd better be prepared to face cavalry maneuvers."

The wagon captain looked at him curiously. "I've heard some of those rumors, but I haven't taken them seriously. It's a kind of wild story, mister. I understand the West is full of tales like this."

Owen wanted to tell him that the United States Army believed these rumors; that Army men had witnessed some of Quale's trained fighters.

"We'll post double guards when we reach the Crow River," Hodgson said. "We don't want to take any chances."

They made eighteen miles the first day out, camping at Willow Grove, a regular stop on the route. In the morning when they moved out again, Charlie Barrett rode far ahead of the column with Owen. Hodgson had point riders and flankers, along with a rear guard, watching for a surprise attack.

The little scout seemed singularly unconcerned—even the fourth day out when they saw Indian smoke signals on the distant ridges and the point riders tore back toward the slowly-moving wagons.

Owen said, "We're in Sioux country now, Charlie. They see us."

Barrett nodded. "They're passin' the word around that strangers are in the country," he said. "They'll have a look at us, but they won't want to taste our lead. Reckon they'll let us pass through."

"No trouble at all?" Owen persisted.

Barrett shrugged and grinned. "Some young bucks will want to try their hand at runnin' off stock tonight, but they won't git far if we keep all the animals inside the enclosure."

Behind them the wagons had stopped

when the smoke signals were sighted. Anxious-faced settlers stared at the ridges where the thin columns of white smoke lifted up against the sky, motionless as if they were painted there.

"We'd better git back there," Barrett grinned, "afore Hodgson starts circlin' his wagons. It'll take him three hours to git straightened out again."

They rode back to the wagons, and Barrett signaled for them to come ahead. The column started to move again, but every man rode with his rifle in readiness, and the drivers waited for the first sign to circle the wagons.

In the afternoon they spotted groups of red riders in the distance, pirouetting around. Two half-naked bucks dashed to within a hundred and fifty yards of Charlie Barrett and Owen, yelling insanely, but they broke away when the scout lifted his rifle and pointed it at them.

Barrett watched them skitter away, clinging to the sides of their horses, still yelling. He chuckled and said, "They'll be braggin' tonight in their camps how close they came to us. That's half of an Injun's life—tellin' somebody how brave he was."

At Barrett's suggestion the stock was brought inside the enclosure for the night, and double guards were around the camp. The wagons were drawn up in a huge circle, the tongues pointing in toward the center, the front wheel of one wagon chained to the rear wheel of the one ahead of it. Heavy chains were run across the small opening through which the stock had been driven.

There was none of the singing and laughter that night which had characterized previous nights on the trail. Watchful men ate their suppers, rifles close at hand, staring out over the darkened plains.

Charlie Barrett, sipping a cup of coffee, said to Owen, "What in hell they worried about? There's not an Injun in the West will attack before there's light in the sky. If there's trouble, it'll come at dawn."

Only Hawkes seemed unconcerned by the impending danger. Hawkes set up his plank right after the evening meal and started to hurl his knives.

Sitting with Lucy Munroe in front of their wagon, that was the sound Owen heard for almost an hour—the hollow plunk of Hawkes's knives into the wood—one, two, three, and then a few moments pause while the thin man retrieved the knives.

The girl said quietly, "Do you think there will be an attack, Owen?"

Owen shrugged. "Barrett feels that they might make an attack," he said, "with the purpose of running off livestock. When they find that we have the stock inside the enclosure they won't stay around long."

"What are you worried about?" Lucy wanted to know.

Owen looked at her. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"It's in your eyes," she said. "You feel that there's danger on this trip, and yet you're not worried while we're going through Indian country."

"There's always danger in strange country," Owen countered. He changed the subject abruptly. "What do you intend to do when you find your uncle in the goldfields?"

Lucy shook her head. "Father died a year ago," she explained, "and Uncle Ben invited us out. We have no definite plans. George, of course, wants to dig for gold. I had to go along with him."

They sat there, listening to the crackle of the campfires and the low talk of the settlers. Hawkes was sharpening his knives now, bent over his whetstone, a grotesque figure in the light of the nearest fire.

AT MIDNIGHT Owen crawled out from beneath the Munroe wagon, and went out with Charlie Barrett as part of the relief watch patrol. They were on duty until dawn.

Squatting on their heels in the tall grass nearly a hundred yards from the wagons,

they watched the stars fade out, and then Barrett said briefly, cocking the hammer of his Henry rifle, "I smell 'em."

Owen caught a glimpse of them a few moments later. They were on foot, running through the grass, crouching low, barely discernible in the dim light of early dawn.

"Here goes," Barrett grinned. He aimed the rifle and pulled the trigger.

Owen saw one of the Indian raiders straighten up, spin, and then drop in the grass. The others whooped in dismay, and as silently as they had come they left again.

There were shouts and screams of women from the wagons. Heavy gauge guns started to boom, and Charlie Barrett said casually, "Ain't none of 'em shootin' at anything but shadows out there. That bunch is ridin' away now. I kin hear 'em."

Owen heard them, too, the patter of pony hoofs on the plains, and then from a distance the shrill, defiant, Sioux war whoop.

"Just a few of 'em," Barrett observed, "an' they'll git hell from the big men in their camp. We'll be out o' Sioux country in two days. Never did worry much about them this trip anyway."

"We hit the Crow River," Owen murmured, "when we leave Sioux territory."

Barrett looked at him. "Reckon that's right," he said grimly, "an' that's where our work starts, Owen."

Back at the wagons they found the settlers digging in, ready for a bloody battle. Eph Hodgson ran up, waving a heavy Colt gun. He yelled,

"Somebody fired a shot, Barrett. They're all over the place. Must be a couple of hundred of them out there."

"There's one," Barrett said drily, "an' he's deader than hell. Roll your wagons, Hodgson."

The wagon captain stared at him. "The boys have been seeing them!" he muttered.

"Give the boys a good shot o' rum each," Barrett said. "It's cold out there."

They were moving in an hour, and the tension was broken. Owen, riding out with Charlie Barrett, heard singing behind him as the wagons struck the trail again.

"They figure their troubles are all over," Barrett growled. He glanced back and added: "There's two of 'em ain't singin'."

Owen knew whom he was referring to. Hawkes, the man with the warped brain, didn't sing, and neither did the gray man, Samuels. As usual Samuels rode beside a big Conestoga wagon, which Owen had learned only two days before was his. He'd been under the impression that Samuels was one of the band of loose riders, stringing along with the outfit for protection through Indian country.

Eph Hodgson had informed him Samuels owned the extra big vehicle, which appeared to be heavily loaded. A sour-faced man with a harelip drove the wagon, and Samuels rode beside it all during the day, never leaving it as some of the men did to go up ahead with the point riders.

French Joe and Asa Simms usually ate with Samuels at night, and Owen was a little surprised at the connection between this taciturn, grim-faced man, who apparently had education, and the two border ruffians. There was no friendliness between the men of the wagon. The hare-lipped man did the cooking. Simms and French Joe rustled up the firewood or the buffalo chips. Samuels would sit on a little folding camp chair, eating silently, looking into the fire. The three men scarcely ever spoke to him, and he never looked at them.

"That's a hell of a crew," Eph Hodgson had said on one occasion.

"He's pulling a heavy wagon," Owen had observed. There were four big mules in the traces, hauling the Conestoga, and when the wagons rolled through soft ground, or were coming out of river beds, Samuels' wagon had to be double-teamed.

"When he rolled the wagon to the camp grounds in Deadwood," Hodgson explained, "he said he was hauling in mining machinery for the goldfields. That's all I know about it."

The second day after the unsuccessful raid by the Sioux, Charlie Barrett and Owen, far out ahead of the wagon train, dismounted and walked down to a tiny little stream of clear, cold water, less than ten feet across, running over a gravelly bottom.

Barrett drank some of the water, then he stood up, wiping his lips. He smiled grimly. "Reckon this is it, Owen."

"What?" Owen asked him.

"Headwaters o' the Crow," the scout said tersely. He pointed toward the ridges to the north. "Quale's hideout is up beyond them ridges. We was in there with three troops o' cavalry last June. First time Major Sanderson hit their trail up there he damned near fainted—shod horses, ridin' in column o' fours, up there where there ain't another Army post clean to the Pacific. We follered some o' the sign, but they knew we was comin' after 'em, an' they split up like Injuns, leaving dozens o' different trails, each one of 'em endin' on hard rock."

Owen whistled softly. He said slowly, "Cavalry tactics on the offensive, and Indian ruses on the defense. That's a hard combination to fight, Charlie."

He stared at those ridges, fully twenty-five miles away. It was broken country beyond—broken, desolate country, not even inhabited by Indians, but somewhere in that vast land of deep draws, hidden canyons, vast mountain forests and meadowland, lay the hideout of the devil. He'd been assigned to find that hideout. There was the distinct possibility that he'd leave his bones to dry in one of the deep canyons beyond those ridges.

THEY found the burned-out remains of one of the wagon trains which had attempted to go through the previous spring. Owen and Charlie Barrett came upon the charred embers and the twisted ironwork first, and they stood there for some time in silence. It had been a small party, and from the position of the burned wagons, it was evident that they had not had time to circle and put up a fight.

"One quick charge," Barrett murmured, "from over that little ridge where they was hidin'." He added grimly, "Or maybe they jest rode up lookin' like a column o' troopers from the distance, an' the wagon captain figured he was gettin' a cavalry escort out o' nowhere. It was over pretty quick."

The wagons came up and Eph Hodgson called for the midday halt near the spot. He did it reluctantly, realizing that the sight of those burned wagons was not going to help his party, but there was water here, and Barrett reported that there was none for another ten miles.

Owen saw Hawkes walking about among the charred wheels and twisted iron hoops which had formed the framework for the canvas covers. When the thin man came back he was mumbling to himself.

Eph Hodgson came over to Owen and he said quietly, "I understand this is the country that man Quale is supposed to run. I'd suggest that we get through it as fast as we can."

Charlie Barrett, standing nearby, whittling at a piece of wood with his hunting knife, laughed tonelessly.

"If they want to hit at this party, mister, they'll do it, an' you can't run far enough or fast enough to git away."

Hodgson's face lost a little color. He looked at Owen and asked, "Do you think they're in the country now?"

"We intend to make a wide scout late this afternoon after we stop," Owen told him. "We'll see what we can turn up."

Watching the wagon train, Owen remembered that he had orders to leave the outfit at the first sight of Quale's brigands. Charlie Barrett was to go with him. Barrett had only signed up to accompany the train to the Crow River country, and Eph Hodgson understood that. He had another scout with the party, and the trail was fairly well-marked all the way to their des-

tination, but Hodgson had come to depend upon Barrett's judgment in many matters, and he was going to miss the man.

Hodgson was a good and dependable man, but a man with no real knowledge of Western warfare. If Quale should attack him and employ cavalry tactics he would be at a loss as to how to defend himself.

Riding off with Charlie Barrett at four o'clock that afternoon when the train had stopped for the night and the wagons were circled on the plains, Owen said, "If you were Hodgson, Charlie, would you be looking for trouble from Quale?"

"If I were Hodgson," Barrett growled, "reckon I wouldn't be in this damned country to begin with. I'd be sittin' back along the Missouri waitin' fer the Army to clean them vermin out."

"They wouldn't listen to that," Owen smiled. "Most of them have enough money and supplies to reach Oregon. If they had to wait six months at the Missouri, and spend a winter there, they couldn't make it."

"They be alive," Barrett said ominously, "which is damned sight more than they'll be if Quale hits 'em."

"Then you expect trouble?" Owen persisted.

Barrett stared toward the ridges. "I look at it this way," he said slowly. "This Quale, if Captain Malloy has him right, has a grudge agin the army. He wants to kill troopers more than anything else, but he's hittin' at these wagon trains fer one thing."

"Supplies," Owen nodded. "I figured that, too. He's a white man, and he's supposed to have other white men with him. They don't want to live on buffalo meat all year round. These wagons are jammed with foodstuffs."

"An' munitions," Barrett added. "Guns an' bullets. Quale needs them more than he needs food. A big outfit like this will have plenty o' guns for him."

Owen had his answer. It meant that Quale was going to hit at this outfit. They rode on in silence for some time, moving in the general direction of the ridges. The sun was still high in the heavens, Hodgson having stopped quite early in the afternoon because he'd hit water.

They struck no trails—plenty of buffalo and antelope, and once, very old tracks of unshod ponies—an Indian trail, but no shod horses which would be Quale's men.

They were two or three miles from the wagon train, and the wagons were indistinct because of the sun haze, when Charlie Barrett stopped his pony suddenly. There was nothing in front of them, and Owen looked down at the ground, thinking the scout had seen something on the ground, but Barrett was staring toward the ridges. Then Owen saw it—rounded flashes of light on one of the higher ridges, a light which came, disappeared and came again.

"Signal mirrors," Barrett murmured. "Reckon they see us, Owen."

Owen nodded. There was nothing unusual about the mirrors. Most plains Indians were using mirrors now to signal to each other at a distance. The Western Army, too, was using the heliograph.

"Damned funny about them signals," Barrett said. "Can't figure out who they're talkin' to. Ain't no other mirrors along the ridge."

Owen's eyes were riveted on that flashing ball of light. He'd seen Indians work mirrors before, but this was different. These flashes were short and long, short and long, rapid, short flashes, and then a long one. It was very orderly, and then he got it.

Barrett was saying, "Now who in hell are they talkin' to?"

"Morse code," Owen said slowly. "They're using the Morse code—the telegrapher's code. I worked in the telegraph office back at the post for a while when the operator was sick. They're spelling out a message, Charlie!"

Snatching out a stub of pencil and a small notebook, Owen started to write it

out. The signaler from the ridge was not very fast, and Owen had little difficulty, even with his brief knowledge of telegraphy, keeping up with him. He spelled out:

T-I-N-G pause O-R-D-E-R-S.

He'd missed the first few letters, but the message was clear enough. WAITING ORDERS. He read it aloud, and Charlie Barrett scratched his jaw and stared at the ridge. The signal light had stopped now.

Owen turned and scanned the horizon behind them. Charlie Barrett spotted the return flash at almost the same instant as himself. Neither man spoke for a moment. They sat astride their horses, staring at that bright ball of light—the reflection of the sun on a tiny mirror. It came from a point several miles behind them—it came from the wagons!

"Kin you read it?" Barrett asked slowly.

Owen jotted down the letters. It was a one word message, and it was flashed much more rapidly, indicating that the telegrapher at the wagon train was more efficient with the code. It said:

T-O-M-O-R-R-O-W.

Then the light stopped abruptly. There was no answering signal from the ridge. The entire exchange had consumed about three minutes.

Charlie Barrett looked at the single word Owen had written down on the pad. He said succinctly, "Ain't nothin' goin' to happen till tomorrow anyway, Owen."

Owen was still staring back at the distant wagons. They were blurry in the afternoon haze. He said to Barrett, "Could you pick out the wagon where the signal was flashed?"

The scout shook his head. "Could be any of a dozen on this side," he pointed out. "That's a damned big circle there, Owen."

Owen started to ride back toward the wagon corral, Barrett following him. The scout said softly, "So we got a snake with us, Owen."

"If we knew what wagon it was," Owen murmured, "we might be able to check up on the man who sent that message."

"He's in with Quale," Barrett said.

Owen smiled tightly. "It might be more than that," he stated. "That message from our wagons was an order. The signaler was giving the orders."

Charlie Barrett looked at him queerly. He said finally, "Quale himself!"

"I don't know," Owen admitted. "I'm going to find out."

CHAPTER THREE

The Sun of Treason

WHEN they returned to the train the campfires were already glowing inside the enclosure. Owen studied the dozen wagons which had been facing the ridges directly. He glanced at Barrett, but he didn't say anything. The scout had noticed it, too. One of the wagons was the big Conestoga which belonged to Samuels.

Eph Hodgson had been waiting for them anxiously. When they came in he said abruptly, "We saw Indian mirrors off on the ridge, Barrett. What do you make of it?"

Owen glanced at the faces of the men with Hodgson. He said briefly, "We saw them, too. They've sighted us."

"Who?" Hodgson wanted to know. "It—it wasn't Quale?"

Owen looked at him. It was evident that no one in the camp had been able to read the message sent from the ridge.

"I'm not sure who it was," Owen stated.

He walked over to the Munroe wagon. Lucy had a cup of hot coffee waiting for him.

She stood a few feet away, looking at him, and then asked quietly, "You're really worried now, aren't you?"

He nodded. He looked down along the

line of wagons to the Samuels' campfire. Samuels sat on his usual camp chair a few yards from the fire, sipping coffee. The red glow of the fire illuminated his face, revealing every harsh line.

French Joe and Asa Simms squatted on the ground nearby, eating voraciously, wiping greasy hands on their clothes. Owen looked along the tops of the wagons. It had been no real problem for a man to climb up to the top of the loaded wagon, and lying flat to conceal himself from below, flash that brief message with a tiny pocket mirror, or two mirrors, employing the regular heliograph method of catching the suns rays from any angle and flashing them in the direction desired.

Charlie Barrett came over to the fire and took the proffered cup from Lucy Monroe. He looked at Owen.

"You tellin' Hodgson?"

"Alone," Owen nodded. "I still don't know who flashed that signal." He stood there with the empty tin cup in his hand, looking down at the fire. He saw Hawkes come out with his plank and stand it up against a wagon wheel. It was getting quite dark now, and the first watch had already gone out. A child was crying somewhere across the big enclosure, and far off toward the ridges a wolf howled.

He said to Barrett, "Bring Hodgson outside the enclosure. I want to talk to him now."

When Barrett had gone off, Owen turned to Lucy. "I'm expecting trouble tomorrow. I believe we're going to be attacked, and if we are I'm giving you a gun. If they break through the enclosure I want you to use it —on yourself."

She nodded. Her face was pale in the firelight, but she was smiling. She said, "I think you'll hold them off."

"We'll try," Owen said. He stepped between two of the wagons and walked out about twenty-five yards from the corral. Charlie Barrett and Hodgson joined him a few moments later.

Hodgson said curiously, "What's it all about, Owen? Couldn't you tell me before?"

"Those mirror signals," Owen said quietly, "were in Morse code. I read them."

Hodgson stared at him.

"Not only that," Owen went on, "but they were flashed to a man with our outfit. He signaled back to them and I read his message, too."

"Morse code," Hodgson repeated. "Then these stories about Quale are true?"

"I'm afraid they are," Owen said. "Quale's men are out there, waiting for the order to attack." He paused and he said carefully, "They're to receive that order tomorrow—probably by mirror—from a man in this outfit."

"Who is he?" Hodgson grated.

"Might be Quale himself," Charlie Barrett put in. "The lieutenant here is tryin' to find out."

"Lieutenant?" Hodgson stared at Owen.

Very briefly, Owen explained his mission. He said, "I am ordered to leave this train and search for Quale's hideout. However, under the circumstances, with Quale ready to attack us, I'll remain here."

"I'd like you to take charge then, Lieutenant," Hodgson said. "I'm not a military man, an' it looks as if we're going to be fighting against a kind of army."

Owen nodded. "I don't know how strong they are," he said, "but I'd advise staying where we are. We're in a good defensive position. We have water. We couldn't pick better ground."

That afternoon Charlie Barrett had selected the campsite with care. He'd picked a small knoll with a stream of clear water running along the base of it. They'd circled the wagons on the knoll and let the livestock graze just across the little stream within a hundred yards of the wagons.

"Have the men start digging in tonight," Owen ordered. "Fortify the spaces between the wagons. Bring out all the ammunition available—"

Charlie Barrett uttered a low exclamation, and Owen heard his right hand slap against the butt of the gun in the holster. The scout snapped, "Who in hell is that?"

A man was coming toward them from the wagons. They could see his silhouette against the light from one of the campfires, a lean, erect figure, walking stiffly.

The man said, "Any trouble out here, Hodgson?"

It was the voice of Samuels. He came up and stood in front of them, his back toward the wagons, face in darkness.

He said stiffly, "Any need for secret meetings, Hodgson?"

The wagon captain was a little abashed. "Nothing secret about it," he growled. "We're figuring on staying here and digging in. Barrett and Hill, here, seem to think we're going to be attacked."

"Couldn't this be discussed before a regular meeting of the men?" Samuels asked tersely.

"Calling a meeting now," Hodgson told him. "I had to know first what I'm calling it for. Barrett here is the scout for the party. I'm taking his word that there is danger and that it would be foolhardy to go on."

Owen stood in the background, a little distance apart, saying nothing, looking steadily at Samuels. Samuels spoke.

"I am willing to abide by any decision the men of the camp arrive at, but I will not be ruled by the mandate of two or three."

"We'll call our meeting." Hodgson scowled and strode off, Barrett and Owen following him, Samuels trailing, and then Samuels called to Owen, "You seem to have a great influence in this outfit, young man."

Owen slowed down. He turned around and looked at the man. "I'm interested in preserving my life, Mr. Samuels, the same as any one else."

"We'll hope," Samuels told him, "that you do."

THE mass meeting of the men lasted less than ten minutes, all of them agreeing to abide by Charlie Barrett's decision, not realizing that it was Owen who'd given the order to Barrett.

Grave-faced men left the meeting to start reinforcing their positions beneath each wagon. They dug trenches. They dragged boxes and barrels, big quilts and featherbeds from the wagons, piling them between the wheels and the openings, forming a barricade.

The work progress for hours, far into the night. There was no singing, and no laughing. Owen worked with George Munroe and Charlie Barrett, reinforcing their own wagon for the coming fight.

At Owen's suggestion, Hodgson passed on the order to bring in as much water as they could, holding it in readiness for possible flaming arrows intended to set the wagons on fire.

It was well past midnight and the men still worked on, digging their shallow trenches beneath the wagons, setting up their barricades, making loopholes for their rifles.

Eph Hodgson came over to where Owen and Barrett were helping a man in the next wagon drag a heavy flour barrel into position between two wagons.

The wagon captain said, "We can't do much more now. Reckon we'll just have to wait till they come in." He looked at Owen closely. "Any idea yet who this feller is sending the signals to Quale's bunch?"

"I might find out in the morning," Owen told him. "We might even know when they're going to attack."

"You'll be watching for their signals?" Hodgson asked him.

"I might even send a few myself," Owen murmured, and Charlie Barrett started to grin broadly.

The next morning was bright and clear. Owen sat by the cookfire, watching the sun rise in the heavens.

He said to Lucy Munroe, "I'd like to

borrow a small mirror after a while, if you have one."

"A mirror?" the girl laughed. "That's rather unusual for a frontiersman."

"My use for it," Owen smiled, "is rather unusual, also. Do you have one?"

Lucy brought it out. It was small and compact. Owen slid it inside his jacket, and walked to the edge of the enclosure.

Charlie Barrett rode in, having completed a brief early dawn scout of the vicinity. He'd seen nothing. Coming up to Owen he said grimly, "I'm thinkin' this bunch back in the ridges will be three or four to one stronger than us. Now that ain't bad odds fer plain Injuns, but we ain't fightin' Injuns."

"If we had one of the Gatling guns at the post," Owen told him, "I'd feel better. Quale's men will undoubtedly be better shots than ours, if they've been drilled in that department along with the others."

Barrett growled, "When do you figure they'll be comin'?"

Owen glanced up at the sun. He said, "I can ask them, Charlie, or I can tell them." He took the small mirror from his jacket and looked at it meditatively.

The little scout started at it, also. He said, "It might work, Owen. You might bring the snake out o' the woodpile, too." He walked off to see Hodgson, and Owen climbed up to the roof of the wagon.

He lay there flat on top of the load, looking along the circle of wagons. From this position he could see all the wagons facing the ridge. There was no one else on the top of any wagon.

Sliding the Army Colt from the holster, he placed it beside him, and then took out the mirror. He had to squirm over on his side, still lying flat so that he could not be seen from below. The sun was in the right position, and he started to flash his mirror on and off for attention.

The answering flashes came back almost immediately from the ridges, indicating that they'd been waiting for a message. Owen smiled grimly. He had his message in mind; he had his plan of battle set. He intended to signal them to come in at high noon, swinging around and coming in from the west, a direct charge, column of fours. They would assume that this was the weak point in the wagon corral.

Instead, it was the strongest, and he planned to have Hodgson take nearly half of his force out of the corral and hide them in the tall grass on this side of the corral. When Quale's brigands charged they would have to pass through heavy rifle fire on either side, as well as from the front. Their ranks would be decimated.

They were waiting for his message now, and he started to send out the letters, hoping that his slowness would not be noticeable or suspected at the other end. He got off five words:

COME IN NOON WEST SIDE.

Then he heard the cold, metallic voice less than ten yards away. It was the voice of Samuels. "That'll be all, Mr. Hill."

Owen had been leaning on one elbow, facing the ridges. He had but to turn his head to see Samuels. The man was standing on top of the next wagon in line. He'd apparently come along the tops of the wagons from his own vehicle after spotting his man. He held his Colt .44 very steady, the muzzle of it trained on Owen's head.

Dropping the mirror, Owen sat up. He saw something else then, down below on the outside of the corral. Three men were sitting astride horses, looking up at Samuels. They were French Joe, Asa Simms and the hare-lipped man. They had a fourth horse with them, saddled, ready to ride.

Samuels said softly, "That was very clever, Mr. Hill. So you caught my message yesterday afternoon."

OWEN didn't look down to where he'd placed his own gun on top of the wagon, not wishing to attract Samuel's at-

tention to it. He tried desperately to remember the exact spot, knowing that his life probably depended upon it.

"I caught your message," Owen said.

"You're an Army man?" Samuels asked, a terrible hatred coming into his eyes. "You're a spy with this outfit?"

Owen shrugged. He shifted his position slightly, and then his right hand darted out to the spot where he'd left the gun. His fingers snatched at bare canvas. The gun was not there!

Samuels stared at him, not quite apprehending the quick movement. Very clearly, Owen realized what had happened. In shifting his position as he tried to get the sun on his mirror, he'd accidentally jostled the gun, knocking it from the top of the wagon. It had fallen into the dust below. He was unarmed.

Samuels' voice was low-pitched, taut with hatred. He said, "You are an Army man. I've suspected it for some time. Hodgson has been taking orders from you, and not from that fool scout."

Owen nodded. "That's right," he said, and then he added slowly, "Mr. Quale."

The gray man's eyes narrowed. He was an animal now, ready to kill. His body was tense, knees bent a little, the gun steady in his hand. He said, "You know me?"

"I've suspected you," Owen told him. "You're a fool, Quale. You can't defeat the United States Army."

"I can kill enough of them," ex-Major Quale snarled, "to make them remember me."

Owen weighed his chances very carefully. He contemplated diving off the top of the wagon, but he was in an awkward position for a jump, and the first move he made Quale would undoubtedly fire. The ex-army man was too good a shot to miss him.

The barrel of the gun was pointed directly at Owen's forehead. He poised himself for the jump. The hammer of Quale's gun clicked, and then something flashed through the air, the sun glinting on it. There was a sickening, sodden sound, and Quale staggered back a little, his left hand reaching up toward his throat.

Owen Hill saw the handle of a hunting knife protruding from his neck. Quale, as he started to fall, swept his gun around and fired twice. Another thrown knife sank into his throat at the breastbone, and then a third, slightly higher, embedding itself in the neck under the chin, the point protruding up into the head.

Quale went down with a terrible, gurgling scream, the gun dropping from his hand. Owen Hill looked down, and he saw Hawkes staggering like a drunken man below, clutching at his chest. His hands were already covered with blood.

He was mumbling. "Quale—Quale! The devil is dead!"

He was dead, himself, when he went down, those two bullets from Quale's gun having gone through his chest, one not more than an inch from the other.

A gun roared from below, and a slug grazed Owen's right cheek, cutting the skin. Asa Simms had fired the shot. The three horsemen were whirling their mounts, preparing to ride away across the plains.

Owen leaped across the space between the two wagons and picked up the gun Quale had dropped. French Joe and the hare-lipped man were already speeding away, but Simms had paused for another shot at Owen. He got the bullet off, but his horse was moving at the time, and the shot was wild.

Owen shot the man through the head with his first bullet. He saw Charlie Barrett scrambling between two of the wagons a short distance away, a Henry rifle in his hand. Barrett looked up at Owen and then dropped to one knee. It was a long shot, about three hundred yards but Barrett didn't miss.

Owen saw French Joe throw up his arms and tumble back off the horse. The hare-lipped man kept riding, but a second

bullet from the Henry caught him twenty yards beyond. He went down.

Lucy Munroe, face white, was staring up at Owen. Eph Hodgson was running toward the wagon. The wagon captain looking down at Hawkes, still on the ground.

Quale lay on top of the wagon next to the Munroe's, body sprawled, staring up into the blue morning sky. His body had been twitching for a few moments. It was still now.

Owen climbed down from the wagon. He said to Hodgson, "Hawkes got Quale."

Hodgson gulped. "Quale?" he gasped.

"Samuels was Quale," Owen explained. "His men are moving this way now. It'll take them an hour or so to reach us from the ridges. They're going to hit the enclosure from the west."

"How—how do you know?" Hodgson asked curiously.

"I told them to," Owen smiled grimly. "We'll have to make our plans quickly. I want fifty of the best shots to come out with me. We're going to conceal ourselves in the tall grass two hundred yards out from the corral. When Quale's men come through we'll hit them from both sides. You'll be inside the corral with every available man."

Eph Hodgson was smiling, nodding. "We'll give 'em hell," he grinned.

Charlie Barrett came up, carrying his rifle. He looked up at the wagon top where Quale's boot was protruding over the edge. He said, "You draw your snake out, Owen?"

"It was Quale, himself," Owen said tersely.

Barrett murmured, "Been wonderin' about him the past few days. Now what in hell took Quale East so that you met him on that stage comin' back?"

Owen thought about it for a moment. He said, "We might have a look into Quale's wagon. That might tell us something."

"Offhand," Barrett said, "I'd say we're goin' to find guns and munitions in there, Owen. That's what Quale needed most out here. He must o' gone East to buy all this stuff, an' then he had it shipped out to Deadwood where he picked up the load an' joined up with Hodgson's train like any other emigrant. That was the best way o' doin' it. He could git through the Sioux country without any trouble, and the Army wouldn't be checkin' up on his wagon if he was travelin' with settlers."

Owen nodded. "At the same time," he said, "he could be directing this raid on the train."

"He wasn't figurin'," Barrett murmured, "on a man by the name o' Hawkes, who could throw a knife through the eye of a needle."

They went to the Quale wagon, and Barrett went to work on the heavy tarpaulins, cutting the ropes with his hunting knife. They found supplies inside, the necessary foodstuffs Quale and his party would need on the trip across the plains, and then they found something else covered with old quilts and canvas, wedged close together so that they would not roll in the big wagon. Two guns.

Charlie Barrett sat down on the floor of the wagon, eyes bulging. He said weakly, "Gatlings! Gatlings, Owen!"

Owen Hill stared at the two big revolving cannons, capable of shooting up to eight hundred bullets a minute—the latest armaments on the Western plains, the terribly deadly Gatling guns!

Barrett said slowly, "He could o' wiped out the whole regiment with these, Owen, if we didn't know he had 'em, an' we charged his hideout."

Owen wiped the perspiration from his face. He was still a little shaken by the sight of those two shining guns.

IT HAD been a minor miracle that Quale had been able to accomplish their purchase without attracting attention. Un-

doubtedly, he'd posed as an army officer, securing the uniform somewhere, forging his credentials.

Owen said quietly, "Roll them out, Barrett. These guns were for Quale's murderers. They're going to have them—muzzles foremost!"

A dozen men rolled the two heavy guns down planks and dragged them out on the plains a short distance from the corral. At Owen's order they were placed about fifty yards apart, facing west, the barrels converging.

Grass and brush were cut and piled up around the two guns, concealing them, the deadly muzzles protruding. Owen stood behind the crank of one, and another ex-army man, who'd had experience with artillery in the Civil War, handled the other.

Owen said to the grinning Eph Hodgson, "Dispose your men now. Keep them down in the grass along the route through which Quale's men will come."

In thirty minutes they were ready for the attack, and then Charlie Barrett's keen eyes caught the first movement far out across the plains. He said tersely, "Comin' up, Owen."

Owen saw them far off in the distance, a tiny column of riders winding up over the rolling plains, disappearing, coming into sight again.

He asked Barrett, "How many?"

The little scout squinted. "I've seen army columns from a distance like that," he said. "If they're ridin' column o' fours there's over three hundred men there, Owen."

Owen shuddered to think what would have happened if they hadn't been forewarned of the attack. Quale and his band would have driven in with the force of an arrow, hitting at the weakly defended portion of the enclosure. They'd have been inside before the settlers knew what had happened. It was this method of attack which had undoubtedly accounted for the massacre of other strong outfits.

In fifteen minutes they could see the column moving in from the west. They'd circled slightly after leaving the ridges, and were coming at a half gallop now.

"Column o' fours," Barrett muttered, "with guidons an' all."

Owen saw the bright guidons rippling in the breeze, another factor which would convince the wagon trains that an army troop was coming up.

"Riders up front," Barrett said slowly, "are wearin' Army jackets an' forage caps, Owen!"

They made no noise, none of the usual shouting and screaming of Indians, although Owen realized there were Indians in that column—cast-off Indians, renegades from their own tribes, half-breeds with no affiliations, white men like Asa Simms and French Joe, the scum of the frontier.

They came on steadily, the head of the column passing the first few men hidden in the grass. Owen waited. He was to give the signal with the first turn of the crank handle and the first spurt of lead from the mouth of his gun.

Beneath his feet, Owen could feel the vibration of the ground as three hundred horses went into a fast gallop at less than a hundred yards from the two Gatling guns.

He could see their faces now—brutal, brown, savage faces beneath the army forage caps. Only about twenty or thirty men at the head of the column wore the blue cavalry uniforms Quale had stolen from Army supplies. The rest were in buckskin, in breechcloths, in cast-off outfits of every description, but those riders up front were sufficient to create the illusion.

A woman screamed from the wagon corral behind Owen, and then he turned the crank handle. He had that column in his sights now and he couldn't miss. He felt the heavy gun begin to jump and quiver as a stream of lead flew from the muzzle.

He heard the other Gatling open up, and saw the flame spit from its mouth. Hodgson's men were firing steadily into the

ranks and they were going down by the dozens, screaming, twisting, their bodies torn by the raking fire from the two Gatlings.

Riderless horses plunged past the Gatling. The column had stopped abruptly, piling up on itself. Horses were down, threshing in death agonies.

Still Owen continued to turn the crank handle, sickened at the sight, knowing that he had to do it. They were still in his sights, and when they finally did manage to break away, leaving fully a hundred men on the ground, the settlers, with Henry repeating rifles, poured a deadly fire into them from both sides.

Owen Hill released his grip on the crank handle. He watched them fleeing away, a pitifully small remnant of the band which had started that charge less than two minutes before.

The happy settlers came running back toward the enclosure, waving their rifles. Women and children ran out to meet them. Hodgson came up, face sweaty

He said, "Reckon that clears the trail, Lieutenant. The wagons can roll again now You'll be coming along with us at least to the mine fields, won't you?"

Owen was watching Lucy Munroe come toward them. She was walking slowly behind the other women.

Charlie Barrett said, "Reckon we'll go on to the mine fields, Hodgson. That right, Lieutenant?"

Owen smiled a little. "We'll go on to the mine fields before returning to Fort Stanton," he said.

Charlie Barrett rubbed his jaw, and there was a twinkle in his eyes. He said, "Kind o' thinkin' we'll be bringin' somethin' back to the post with us this trip, Lieutenant."

Owen looked at him, and then at the girl again. He was smiling when she came up. ● ● ●

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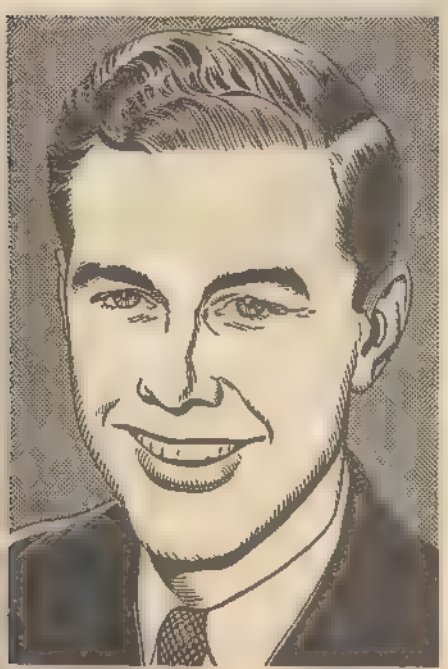

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RIVERMEN LOSE HARD

One dead Chinaman was all the cargo they allowed Captain Crotch on that moonless run down the Colorado—and by his last bullet the captain swore that coffin would have company!

THEY meant to crowd his packet off the Colorado, that much had been evident for some time. But it would take a powerful amount of crowding before the *General Heath* backwatered, or before her tough captain lowered his flag.

Captain Irving Crotch sprawled his round-bellied frame atop a pine box con-

They went forward noislessly until they reached the tree to which the barge had been snubbed. . . .

By W. EDMUNDS CLAUSSEN

siderable forward of his ship's engine. The pine box contained a locally constructed coffin and this in turn carried the remains of Chung Wong, who had been bitten by a hog in the Congress district, and succumbed. The funeral celebration had been a very noisy affair, with pomp and firecrackers, as Chinese funerals usually went, and now Chung Wong, who had taken his share of gold out of the Congress hills, was being shipped the long way home—down the Colorado to Port Isabel on the Gulf, there to be transferred aboard a coastwise schooner to San Diego, where he would be placed on another windjammer that would plod the difficult sea lanes to China. Before one-tenth of that homeward journey could be completed Chung Wong would become a very smelly corpse.

Crotch had a vague recollection of carrying Chung Wong alive upriver aboard the *General Heath* six months ago. He meant no disrespect to Chung as he sprawled atop the coffin; rivermen had long ago gotten to treat the matter of such cargo simply as cargo. He had no fear whatsoever of Chung Wong's objecting to his being atop the yellow pine box. The coffin lid was down to stay.

But Chung Wong was the only La Paz cargo aboard the *Heath*. In the ship's safe lay the contract Irving Crotch had written with La Paz Milling Company, to carry their surplus ore to the river's mouth at ten dollars a ton. The contract had two months yet to go, and in the face of this iron-clad legality the milling company had delivered their loaded barges to Amos Jamison. Jamison belonged to the Arizona Navigation combine, made up of four large boats that plowed the river from Port Isabel to Callville, eating every drop of profit before the *General Heath* could come within smelling distance.

Undoubtedly Jamison had offered to haul the company's ore to Port Isabel for five dollars. A contract was not worth the paper it was written on unless a riverman had the guts to make it stick. The next time he met a Navigation captain, Irving Crotch meant to teach the Navigation Company a healthy respect for the *Heath*. His present thoughts were even more scorching than the white-hot river sun.

From the open pilothouse Ben Goss' voice struck him. "Irv, quit sittin' on that dead Chinaman. Come up here!"

He waved a hand in a brusque gesture and Crotch unbent his blocky frame and moved toward the ladder. He wore light cotton trousers, blue shirt, and a black marine cap set at a rakish angle. His face was burned nearly as dark as his ship's blackened hull, with reddish sideburns marching across his jowls. His eyes were shiny pin-points of metal as a result of his simmering anger.

He climbed aloft to the texas, rounded it toward the small bridge deck. Heat from the open engine pit was belching upward, the bare-skinned Cocopahs heaving logs from their bunkers into its fiery maw amid a spouting of escaping steam. The *General Heath* had a single-cylinder, vertical-beam, low-pressure engine, paddles at her stern, and a sloping prow that gave her the look of a scow. Yet Crotch was bringing her down to Castle Dome in a little more than five hours, a record run which set her speed at nearly twenty miles an hour. He was sure he would outrun the larger packet with its string of stolen barges before night. When he did—hell would break loose!

Ben Goss handed him the wheel and Crotch altered his course a point to suit him better. A thin bar lay concealed beneath eighteen inches of water in what had been the navigation channel on the up-river run. Shifting bottom was always the curse of the Colorado; it was a lucky pilot who didn't hang up on a gravel spit once or twice on every run.

Goss was grinning in his wide-mouthed way. "You feelin' better, Irv?"

The captain grunted, shook the boat

across the bar at its thinnest end. Goss was a slender-slabbed, salt-water seaman, a friend from Crotch's earlier days. He wore a blue-black beard and a miserable beaver felt hat. Together they had piloted the *Heath* up and down the river for years, asking only that the gravel spits were moist.

When the boat sloshed back into deeper, roily water, Goss said, "I want to get my hands around a Navigation man's throat! Any one of the ringy crew, but Jamison will satisfy me most!"

"Jamison!" Crotch spat the word out coldly. "He's the pirate! When he gets me off the river he'll lift the rates up to twenty dollars—and these alkali-soaked rats don't have the sense to see it!"

His fight was with Amos Jamison, not the milling company. After all, they were in business to get the lowest rates offered. The difficulty was that river freighting had become a cutthroat game. With Jamison it was dog eat dog. He would treat Jamison the way a cur was treated.

Goss said wryly, "When we get around the bend we'll see if any company boats are tied up at Castle Dome."

"The *Amador'll* be there." Crotch looked up quickly. "Light's failin' fast and Jamison can't get her much farther in the dark."

A GRAND sight burst upon them as they rounded the bend above Castle Dome and came down the straight channel to the landing. The *Amador* had her nose against the dark bank, tied fore and aft to trees, her ore-laden barges secured beside her. She had met the up-river *San Diego* and both Navigation Company boats had tied up for the night.

Crotch rang off his engine, drifted against the bank a good fifty yards above the *Amador*. Safeties let go as his head of steam began escaping. The Cocopah Indians stood at the port rail, for and aft, ready to throw their lines, but no one on shore came to catch them, and from this Crotch judged Jamison had already talked and no one in Castle Dome wanted to take sides in the trouble that was coming.

He took a sleek-barreled Navy from a holster beside the wheel, thrust it inside his waistband. He tossed Goss a wicked look.

"Comin', Ben?" He felt glee reach up all the way from his belly.

With Ben Goss's aid he had won himself a respectful place on the river. They would whip hell out of anything now that tried to take it from them. Together they went down the ladder, boots barely touching the tread-boards.

At the open engine compartment, Crotch paused. He could see his engineer, Jim Melott, against the fiery boiler.

"Jim, take care of things on deck. Give anyone a boot who thinks he might want to come aboard."

Bone-lean Jim Melott grinned, wiping glistening sweat-beads from his hairy chest. "So you caught up with the damned pirates? Sure won't let them step aboard, Irv!"

Crotch wheeled, turned again for a final word across his shoulder. "Better keep your steam up. Jamison may try slugging his way through this."

He went after Goss at a sort of dogtrot, a nervous way he had developed of running when inside pressure raked him. The Cocopahs had run out the gangplank and were making the steamboat fast to a pair of stumps on the river bank. He repeated to them that no one must be allowed to come near the gangplank. Then he and Goss hurried over the hard-packed trail to the landing. A savage satisfaction welled inside him.

At the landing the earth was pressed smooth and level from uncounted freight loadings. A few trees had been spared the axe so that boats might easily tie fast. Hard by the bank stood the Navigation Company freight shed, beyond this a straggling row of adobe buildings, most of them with windows alight.

He reached the *Amador* first but she lay in darkness, with her plank withdrawn, and beside the pilothouse of the *San Diego* he could see a pair of dark figures. They waved mockingly as he came in closer.

The *San Diego* was a trim single-ender of thirty feet greater length than Crotch's ship, with a pointed prow and heavy hog-framing, and a circular pilothouse perched cage-like atop her texas. Amos Jamison stood at her upper railing, her skipper Clyde Maddix beside him.

"You got a stiff passenger aboard?" Jamison called down, and his tone carried a taunting laugh. It was obvious Jamison had refused to carry the pine box from La Paz, taking only the ore barges.

Crotch felt heat fan up beneath his side-whiskers. "Run out a plank, Jamison. We're going to talk about freight!"

"It'll be run out," Jamison said and beside him Maddix laughed. "Somebody here who came up from Port Isabel to pick up your cargo. Better stay where you're at."

"You get that plank out, or I'm climbing your rail! You figure to get away with this?"

Jamison's face hardened. Maddix left his position beside him now, and Jamison spoke more gruffly. "I already got away with it. If it's ore you want, better dig some yourself. Navigation Company don't give a damn about your contract. Neither does the milling company."

"How much are you hauling their stuff for a ton? Whatever it is, you'll raise it five times if you're able to crowd us off the river. Your Navigation Company's a rotten filthy hog!"

Jamison took that, his wide face setting in a dangerous scowl. Along the river it was understood he owned half the stock in the Navigation combine, the balance divided by his three other partners. Maddix belonged in this, but he was only a small

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voice, his tight-fisted, greedy ways making him an amicable partner. Jamison was the big shot. Break him and you broke the combine.

Now Crotch was thoroughly angered. He lifted his voice hoarsely. "You try to move these barges down-river and I'll sink them!"

"And you," Jamison roared back, "if you don't float your scow away from the landing you won't be afloat by morning!"

Crotch plunged knee-deep into the river, his red sidewhiskers bristling. Maddix's voice caught him as he reached for the *San Diego*'s railing.

"Gentlemen! A lady—no more fighting! May I present another passenger for Captain Crotch? A lady who has come all the way from Port Isabel to meet you, Captain!"

Crotch stood stock still, flame pounding behind his eyeballs. A swinging lantern aboard the lower deck brushed against the reed-slim figure beside Maddix. She was a woman in a printed cotton dress, a vagrant, searching look about her face. In that swift moment bitter foreboding struck Crotch. The girl was dressed in the newest California style, wasp-thin waist and bustle behind. Beneath her saucy hat he recognized distinct Chinese features. Warning laced through him like a knife. Jamison was turning over to him Chung Wong's sister or sweetheart, or his wife!

The gangplank came over the side and now Maddix was helping her onto it. She came gracefully down by herself, a well-shaped, beautiful creature who had shipped halfway around the world to join the man Crotch carried on his foredeck in a box.

Maddix said heartlessly, "Her trunk, Captain. You may have all of her from here on." He gave the trunk a shove with his boot and it came sliding halfway down the plank.

The girl was standing on the foot of the board, her helpless gaze sliding from Goss to Crotch. As Crotch watched, her gaze lowered. He felt a stab of pity that had generally been alien to him along the river. He was a hard, rough man, but the Chinese girl touched him.

He said softly, "Her trunk, Goss. Get your shoulder under it."

It was an ornate affair, a square box with Chinese characters printed on its four sides. He saw this from the corner of his glance, saw Goss brush past on his way up the gangplank. Then he reached a calloused hand after the girl. He heard Maddix snicker.

THEY were walking closer to the *General Heath* where the landing strip was uneven. The Chinese woman lunged and fell against him. He put out an exploring hand, brushed her hip and drew back embarrassed.

She righted herself quickly, turning up her elongated face. "Captain, I am Linda. You I know, for they have told me many things. You are not at all as I expected."

Crotch felt heat exuding from his beet-red face. "What did them two say about me?"

For a moment she lost her Celestial gravity and giggled. "I am not one to judge a man until I meet him. Come, now, I must see Chung. You wonder that I speak American so well?"

Crotch was not wondering much, other than what he might tell her about Chung, who lay stiff inside his crude casket. He merely grunted.

"I went to an American missionary school in China. Chung learned to speak, too, before he came. We promised each other that if we were coming to America we must be good Americans."

And in this respect, Crotch quietly considered, Chung Wong had differed vastly from his countrymen who groveled filthily in their diggings, subsisting on a few pennies' worth of rice. Crotch halted, laid a rough hand against her shoulder.

"Ma'am," he got out gruffly, "just what are you to Chung Wong?"

She lowered her grave face slightly. "I am his bride. I was just fifteen, Captain. He has been gone three years. It is such a long time to be without his love."

He was still, his coarse, red-whiskered face falling into sober lines, his eyes expressionless but in the end betraying him.

This time it was her small hands that sought him out. "Captain, what is it? Chung is not well?"

There was no beauty in Crotch, neither in his physical makeup nor in his soul that had been tempered in salt brine and riverboat steam. His background was completely alien to the strange scent of oriental perfume that infiltrated his nostrils. Yet, drawing on a source completely beyond him, he told her in a comparatively beautiful way.

"Chung, ma'am, is very happy. He is where you never work, never rip out your heart. He is where all good Americans—and good Chinese—hope to go. We say he went over the hill."

To speak of the dead is understandable in all languages, and she fell against him weakly. He felt a sob rack her inside and he knew his own swift regret. She drew away, slanting eyes clinging to his hairy face.

"When did it happen? How was it?"

How to tell a woman the ignoble fact that her husband has been bitten by a hog while celebrating the Feast of Lanterns? That he has died from poisoning resulting from unclean teeth taking hold in his rump! Crotch cursed silently in his throat.

Obviously she had been given no knowledge of her husband's death until this moment. Crotch cleared his throat, lied magnificently:

"Chung died bravely. You can be proud. Now let me help you to the ship."

Somewhat awkwardly, then, he led her up the plank.

They left Linda Wong seated on the foredeck beside the coffin. Her cheeks were dead white in the steamboat's scant light. When Ben Goss dumped the trunk with the Chinese characters beside her, she failed to move. He hurried down the companionway, following his captain.

"You turnin' soft over a Chinaman?" he asked brusquely.

Crotch grunted belligerently. "Nobody's gone soft about anything. Get that plank in before they come storming!"

"We ought to have pulled Jamison off his texas. The way they treat a white man is miserable!"

They met Jim Melott beside the engine pit and Crotch issued an order. "Have your Cocopahs ready to fight. I told Jamison I'd sink the barges and he isn't going to stand for that. We're going to do it, Jim! I had a look at his eyes. He's mean as hell."

CROTCH swung to the ladders leading to his high wheelhouse, his hide still smarting under the stalemate Jamison had forced upon him. From the vantage point of his narrow bridge he could completely survey the landing.

The *Amador*'s decks were quiet and she was definitely tied fast for the night. But the *San Diego* still held her head of steam, and both Navigation captains were aboard her. He could look for trouble from that source.

His mind flashed back quietly over the past, knowing how hard Goss and Melott and he had struggled for what they owned. Five years ago Henry Wickenburg had found gold in the hills bordering the Colorado. Gold seekers had swarmed in after the metal, using the rough overland trails, the river, any method they could command. They needed mining machinery, supplies and equipment, most of which would be shipped from the California coast by way of the river.

Crotch had foreseen the tremendously rich prospects of the Colorado and had for-

saken his Sacramento River run to bring his staunch *General Heath* down the coast to Port Isabel. That had been long ago—and Navigation Company had battled him all the way.

His own seamanship had been schooled into him off the Nantucket shoals, where years before his mother had given him birth during a stormy Atlantic crossing. When the gold rush reached white heat in California he had refitted a New England ferry, timbered up her lower decks, and with cordwood stowed in every available cubbyhole, he had sailed her around the Horn. It was her engine now that powered the *Heath*.

Ben Goss had shipped with him as mate. Jim Melott they had picked up off Chagres, the rottenest place for white humanity in the world. He had been a fever-ridden, sunken skeleton, but a wizard with steam. . . . This, then, was their background. Together they had hewn for themselves a place on this river which snaked its way through four hundred miles of forsaken desert. They had no idea of giving up now.

Crotch's rugged fist tightened against the rail as he stared at Maddix's big packet. There was activity along the landing but it was too dark for him to make out exactly what was taking place. When her wheel started to splash he knew deckhands had unfastened her lines. She came slowly upriver against the current, gaining speed as her big buckets dug deeply into the river.

Crotch's face eased into a thin smile as he evaluated the possibilities of what Maddix might try. If the *San Diego* struck him Maddix might drive his own lighter craft hopelessly aground with his big paddle. Yes, that was what Maddix meant; not simply the destructive loosening of timber by a sudden collision.

But the *General Heath* lay in shallow water. Between her and the main channel, where Maddix would bring up his packet, lay a sand bar. His own ship could skim lightly across the bar—but not the *San Diego!*

Below on the cargo deck Jim Melott doused the light from a brass bulkhead lantern on his way into the engine pit. Crotch saw Goss scurry across the deck, axe in his hand. His glance ran up to the wheelhouse and Crotch nodded, barely perceptible from below. He rang the engine pit for reversed paddle, and knew Melott in his steamy hole would be valving the machinery frantically. The *Heath*'s wheel began slowly to revolve; she stood hard against her taut hawsers.

Now Goss had parted the aft line with his axe. He ran forward and began chopping against the fore line. Maddix, meantime, was altering his course directly toward them. He gave a series of shrill blasts on his whistle, his engineer throwing everything into the gamble. Inside the towering wheelhouse Crotch could see two dark figures. He knew Jamison was still aboard, had ordered the ramming.

The *San Diego* struck shallow water. Her clumsy frame shuddered as her thrashing buckets drove her over. Her finely pointed prow was only a few feet from Crotch's packet, and still Goss was chopping away at his straining line. The rope parted to let the light *Heath* skim backward like a rock cast from its sling.

Maddix caught her aft of her blunt prow, driving his sharp bow deep into Crotch's timber. The *Heath* shook to her keel, heeled shoreward toward the low bank. But the backward power of her wheel was drawing Maddix's boat with her. The *San Diego* was aground with half her hull.

Under full power Crotch was dragging her over, the gravel tearing all the time against her bottom. When he felt her pressure ease off in deeper water he rang Melott slow speed forward in order to keep both packets engaged.

Goss was now charging across the deck, carrying a pole. At his heels were the Cocopahs armed with three-foot lengths

of firewood. Some of their passengers were following, armed with whatever they could find. He saw Goss hit the foremost wave of *San Diego* deckhands, swinging his sounding pole against their heads. Others broke through and were at his back, trying to pull him down. But the howling Cocopahs were on them with sledging firewood. Crotch's officers and crew thrived on a fight.

The battle was fierce, loud and furious while they wove back and forth across Maddix's broken foredeck. Crotch saw two men go over the rail, saw them sink momentarily and then come up, striking for the river bank.

Then white froth at Clyde Maddix's stern told him *San Diego* had had enough. He yanked his whistle cord sharply, calling Goss and his Cocopahs onto their own deck. Slowly, very slowly, the heavier packet backed into the channel.

Maddix held her downriver until he reached his former moorings and then rang furiously for his engineer to beach her against the landing. Her bilge was taking water badly after the healthy mauling Crotch had given her on the gravel spit.

CROTCH signaled his packet into the channel and turned her against the landing strip so that her splintered upper works faced up-river and her paddle stood toward the *Amador*. By the time he reached the main deck Goss was heaving new lines around the mooring stumps. Goss had blood smears on his black beard—his shirt sleeves had been torn from both shoulders—but his broad mouth carried a leer.

He said caustically, "Let's you and me climb aboard the other scow and scuttle her!"

Crotch's tight eyes held a wicked gleam as he said to Melott, "Jim, hold your steam. We'll go after the barges before dawn!"

"With your wheel held the way it is

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you mean to swamp them. It's a wonder the dumb clowns can't see it."

But Crotch merely smiled, hand caressing the butt of his Navy, protruding from his thick waist. Goss's next words turned his smile into a frown.

"You seen your Chinaman? I imagine that girl has had a fright."

In the excitement of their battle with Maddix, he had completely overlooked Linda Wong. Now he went at his dogtrot along his deck, cursing Chung Wong and China in general. Whatever small cargo they had picked up above La Paz had gone careening when the Navigation boat rammed them, and he knew a quick fear for Linda.

The starboard foredeck had received a smashing blow that loosened planking liberally and caved away their railing. A few of the passengers had gathered here, one holding a lantern. Its glow brought Crotch a revolting shock.

The pine box had traveled clear across deck, coming up against the port rail and breaking open. Chung Wong had rolled from his casket and lay face up on the planking, waxy and stiff in the lantern light. Linda's trunk had spread forth its contents of feminine apparel and some of this lay on Chung's body. A few feet from the corpse lay Linda Wong. Her bustle and skirts were all askew, across her temples stood the ugly welt of a bruise.

His eyes skimmed the horrified passengers, found one or two torn by the fight with Maddix's crew. "Here, give me a hand. We'll put the Chinaman back in the box."

Two grizzled prospectors helped him lift the corpse into its casket. Then they hammered the nails down with an iron bar one of them had swung in the fight.

Goss came up and awkardly helped him carry Linda toward the cabin deck. Below the stairs he recognized his Chinese cook, still carrying a pick handle which he had used as a bludgeoning weapon.

"Get up and throw one of the miners out of his cabin. Then find the medicine chest."

The cook took the steps three at a time. As an afterthought Crotch yelled across his shoulder at the cook. "Keep your mouth shut about the way her husband died or I'll cut off your ears!"

Then he was backing his way between the handrails, lifting the Chinese woman's shoulders tight to his belly. Below, Goss was struggling with her legs. Crotch was audibly puffing and cursing. They had hoisted cargo in their time—enough if laid end-to-end to reach Fort Yuma—but never had they hoisted anything like this.

THE moon was banked by clouds before he was ready for his try at the barges. Linda Wong, for the time being, was comfortable in a dispossessed miner's stateroom, the Chinese cook looking after her.

Jim Melott maintained a full head of steam, with his pressure valve ready to pop at any moment. In order to kill most of the glow from the boiler, they had hung a blanket around the engine pit. Behind this curtain Melott worked, drenched in sweat.

"They'll have riflemen watching from aft," he said. "Good luck, Irv. When your last hawser's loose, I'll open her up!"

Tied fast as she was, the *General Heath*'s slashing buckets would throw tons of water against the ore-laden barges, hurling them into the *Amador*'s stern. Foolishly Jamison had left those barges between the two steamboats. Crotch had seen something like this done on the Feather River and knew the destructive power behind a revolving wheel.

It all depended on whether they could hack loose the retaining barge lines. If they succeeded, Melott would pour river on them until nothing remained of the big Navigation boats worth the salvage effort.

Crotch went over his rail with Goss in silence. Each carried an axe, each had his

Colt thrust through his belt. In each man lay the accumulated anger that years of Navigation trickery had built into a festering ulcer. Tonight, if they survived Jamison's gunplay, they would wipe the slate clean.

Crotch had made light of the danger. Yet even he in his brash heart expected Jamison would have sentries posted against their approach. It struck him as grossly unbelievable that Navigation Company could be so stupid. His very mooring of the *General Heath,* his all-night firing, his inactivity along other lines following the battle should have given Jamison all the warning he needed.

On the other hand, Jamison's acceptance of the beaching of his *San Diego* so placidly shouted its danger to Crotch. For an hour or so company carpenters had been at work on the larger packet, clearing her wreckage. Then they had quit and the lanterns had been darkened. This quiet on Jamison's part spoke ill for Crotch. He realized, as they moved steadily nearer the barges, that they were walking into a trap.

Goss stopped dead in his tracks. "I don't like it," he murmured.

Crotch lifted a shoulder. "You been hoping they'd be asleep. What else did you expect?"

"They ain't asleep," Goss complained raggedly and his hand slipped free his Navy.

They went forward noiselessly along the strip. When they reached the tree to which the barge mooring lines had been snubbed, they were perhaps fifty feet from the *Amador*'s paddles. Goss spat on his hands, took firm hold on his axe.

"Now, he whispered.

"Give 'er hell!" Crotch answered.

Their tools swung back and then the stillness blew up in the cracking of rifles. Crotch felt the sting of splintered hickory against his palms as a ball whizzed off the end of his axe. Instinctively both men fell on their stomachs, while lead whined above them. Their axes were forgotten as they tore loose their Colts. Goss got off a flurry of shots toward the *Amador.*

"Yonder!" Crotch yelled. "They're in a gully beside the *Heath!*"

"There's a dozen guns yammerin' at us back of his paddle!"

But Crotch ignored the threat from the direction of the Navigation packet. He had caught the mad whine of lead ricocheting off his axe and knew in which direction lay their gravest danger.

"Makes no difference—they're only Cocopahs," he growled. "Indians can't shoot day or night, especially at night. Yonder you'll find Jamison!"

The Cocopahs by now had emptied their guns and Crotch rose on his haunches, crawling toward Jamison's nest. A shot from that direction geysered landing strip in his face. He cut downward with his Colt and threw a shot in the direction of the muzzle-flame. Immediately a second gun answered. Maddix!

Crotch fell back on his belly and cursed, holding the Navy in front of him and squinting his eye along its barrel. His red whiskers were bristling as they scraped the dust. The Colt bucked anew, scoring him nothing.

THE two Navigation captains had chosen a natural pit behind the landing strip, in which it would be impossible to reach them with lead. Positioned as they were virtually beside Crotch's own steamboat, they covered both him and Goss with a dangerous crossfire. Now the guns from the *General Heath*'s main deck were searching the pit. Their fire was ineffectual, passing harmlessly over Jamison's head.

Again Crotch climbed to all fours.

He felt Goss' hand in his belt snagging him back. "You want them to plaster you?"

A shot passed between Crotch's arms and legs, nipping his belt at the belly. Again

(Continued on page 112)

DONEGAL

The town was bound to drink Donegal's liquor—or a lawman's blood. It was up to Will Stauffer's lightning sixes to save it from a crimson morning after!

By
PHILIP
KETCHUM

SAYS—DIE!

"Who says you haven't got a sheriff? What's the matter with me?"

WILL STAUFFER sat is his office, glancing through the morning's mail. None of it was of particular importance. He filed two bulletins, stuffed a bill from the hardware store into his pocket, and disposed of some advertising matter by dropping it into the wastebasket. After this, he glanced at his watch. It was almost noon. The special meeting of the county commissioners, now being held in the court house, should soon be over.

A scowl crossed his face and he got to his feet, walked to the door, and stood

there, staring down the street. He was a tall, thin man with wide, sagging shoulders —younger than he looked. Still under thirty. That had been one of the arguments a year ago against his appointment as sheriff. It was probably being mentioned again, today, for the county commissioners were considering action in a matter wherein they thought he had failed.

There weren't many people on the street, or many horses at the tie-rails. There was no crowd near the court house. Will had half expected there would be. He had half expected that the railroaders might have heard what the county commissioners were considering, and might have gathered to protest against the closing of Donegal's. For that's what the commissioners would do. He was sure of it.

Turning away from the door, he started pacing the room. There was a chance, he told himself, that Donegal wouldn't fight a closing order. There was a chance the railroaders would take it without stirring up trouble. But such a chance was mighty thin. The men who were headquartered here in Granite and who were pushing the railroad on up the valley toward the Cresta Blancas, weren't going to like it if their saloon and gambling hall was padlocked. In their place, he wouldn't have liked it, either.

Footsteps sounded on the porch outside and Will looked up to see Dave McAdams coming through the doorway. McAdams was a big man, big in every way. He was tall, heavy, almost fat. He had a booming voice. He owned the largest ranch in the valley, most of the stock in the Granite State bank, and was chairman of the county board. He had been largely influential in persuading a group of Denver bankers to finance the railroad from Saugus Junction, through Granite to the Cresta Blanca mines. He was a man used to having his own way. Ordinarily, he seemed quite cheerful, and was usually grinning. But he wasn't grinning now. He was tight-lipped, angry, and breathing too fast.

"I take it the board meeting is over," said Will slowly.

"You bet it's over," snapped McAdams. "I warned you a month ago that Donegal had to be closed down. We wouldn't have had to call a special meeting if you had had the guts to do your job."

Will stiffened, both hands clenched tightly at his sides. He could feel a hot flush of color burning in his face. It was all he could do to hold himself steady.

"What action did the board take?" he heard himself asking.

"They gave Donegal a week to close up and get out of town."

"Was Donegal there?"

"Of course he was there."

"What did he say?"

"What could he say? Donegal isn't running this town. He'll close up and get out. If he doesn't, we'll close the place for him."

"And what do you mean by that?" asked Will.

"Just exactly what I said," McAdams answered. "If we don't have a sheriff who can enforce our order, I reckon there are enough men around here to take over in his place."

Will Stauffer nodded. The first heat of his anger was passing. It was still there, but under a tight control. A brief, humorless smile touched his lips. "I wouldn't try that if I were you," he said, slowly. "As long as I'm sheriff, no one's taking over."

"Then maybe you won't be sheriff very long."

"Possible," Will admitted.

McAdams swung toward the door, but as he reached it, he stopped, and looked back.

"Tell me one thing, Stauffer," he demanded. "Where do you stand? About Donegal?"

Will Stauffer shrugged. "I don't know. Bring me a copy of the resolution the board passed. If it's in the form of a court order, let me have that, too."

"You'll get it," barked McAdams. "And it'll *be* a court order!"

McAdams stormed out of the office. Will moved to the window and looked out across the street in the general direction of what people called Railroad Town. His lips were thinned to a stubborn, tight line, but his eyes were worried. He wondered if the county commissioners had any idea of the trouble they were inviting. . . .

There hadn't been a Railroad Town a year before when he had been elected sheriff. In those days, Granite had been a quiet and reasonably peaceful cowtown in the middle of a broad valley south of the Cresta Blanca mountains. Then one day it had been announced that a spur line railroad was to be built up the valley to service a newly discovered goldfield in the Cresta Blancas. And within three months, wagons began hauling in lumber to build the sheds and shack houses which had marked the beginning of Railroad Town. By now, the spur line of the railroad had reached Granite and was extended beyond. In another four to six months, the railroad would be completed. After that, although Granite might be a small division point and might have to house a few railroad families, the bulk of the laborers who had built the road would be gone. Railroad Town, as it was now constituted, would be a thing of the past. The families who remained would be absorbed into the town life of Granite.

But right now, Railroad Town was a very real thing. It housed several hundred men, most of them single, all of them tough, violent. In it, was a place called Donegal's, a saloon and gambling hall, a rowdy and noisy place at night, and sometimes by day.

Will turned back for his hat. He clamped it on his head, moved to the door and, from there, angled across the street and around the corner of the Granite State Bank toward Railroad Town.

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THERE was a crowd around the faro table in Donegal's, a crowd so deep that Will Stauffer couldn't get close enough to see all the players. He could see the dealer, however. She stood behind the table, turning the cards with expert fingers, making her call in a crisp, clear voice. A tall girl, slender, beautiful, and still young. Will had been startled the first time he saw her at the faro table. He hadn't wanted to believe the evidence of his eyes. It had been his immediate thought that the girl didn't belong in a place like this. That she couldn't belong here.

But that had been two months ago.

Frisco Molly, they called her. And Ben Donegal, with a twinkle in his eye, had boasted she was the only woman faro dealer in the country, and ten times as good as most men. Beyond that, he wouldn't say a word, wouldn't say where she had come from or how he had found her. Wouldn't reveal her name.

Will had talked to her several times, but their conversations had been brief and unsatisfactory. She had seemed friendly enough until one night when he had asked for her real name. At that, she had turned stiff and formal. He had made matters worse by saying he didn't think she belonged behind a faro table.

"Or you behind a star," she had snapped back at him. "Doing a lazy man's work. An old man's work. Look at your hands. What would happen to them on the end of a plow?"

They hadn't spoken since then, though he had seen her a dozen times. With an almost expert ease, she had avoided him.

She glanced up and saw him now, then looked down at the cards again, no change of expression on her face. Her glinting, coppery hair was combed high and tied with a black velvet ribbon. Her dull green gown was a little too revealing as it tightened down to a slender waist, and Will Stauffer found himself suddenly scowling. He shrugged. Quite likely, one thing they said of her was true—many of the men who lost money at her table were brought back again by their memories of the dealer.

"Hey, look who's here, gents," called a derisive voice. "Maybe we're all gonna get run out of town!"

The man in front of Will turned to look at him. Then another man turned; a sudden, sharp hostility lay in their expressions. And Will forgot about the girl immediately, aware of these men around him.

He had come here to Donegal's many times. He had had drinks at the bar. He had met quite a few railroaders. On several occasions he had settled rows. On other occasions he had made arrests. The hostility he'd met before, had been on an individual basis. Never with an entire group feeling it, as did these men.

"So you're going to close this place down, huh?" cried the man who had called attention to him. "Go ahead. Let's see you."

"Sure. Let's see you," called another voice. "Throw me out first."

They were crowding in closer to him. Men in the rough garb of their work, sweat-stained shirts and trousers. Men with hands calloused from wrestling ties and wielding double-jacks, or shoveling rock for the roadbed. Men who had heard of the action of the county board, and who resented it. They hadn't felt welcome in the saloons uptown, but they did here. This was their refuge, their club, and they didn't mean to see it closed.

Will was ringed in, and the pressure around him was growing heavier as more and more men came up. He shouted for attention, but all around him the railroaders were voicing their anger.

A hand thrust at his shoulder, staggering him. Someone clawed for his gun, pulled it from its holster. A fist snagged across his face. Another ripped into his stomach. Suddenly and with a desperate hopelessness, Will exploded into action. A man in front of him went down under a smashing blow to the chin. Another reeled

backwards, held up by the press of the crowd. Against those he could see, Will was doing all right, but he had no defense against the men behind him, or the men at the side.

A hammering blow on the back of the head stunned him, drove him forward. He felt the rocking impact of another and there was suddenly no strength in his legs to hold him up. His knees hit the floor. He clawed at a man's body, but was shoved down. A heavy boot ripped viciously into his side.

Through the fog which was sweeping over him he heard a voice, a woman's voice shouting: "Hey, that's enough. We don't want to kill him. We want to teach him to respect us. He's had a good lesson."

There were cries of disagreement but the woman shouted them down. She seemed to Will to be standing almost astride his body. He could picture her there. Frisco Molly—her head thrown back, her dark eyes flashing.

"This is the kind of sheriff we want," she insisted. "One who knows what to expect when he comes down here. Drag him to the store room and tie him up. We'll have a talk with him later on before we whip him home across the tracks."

And she had her way. Hands grabbed Will Stauffer by the shoulders and the arms, pulled him across the floor, and into a darkened room. A rope was lashed around his body and his legs and he was left there.

CHAPTER TWO

Death Bargain

IT WAS chilly in the store room. The air was thick with the smell of hops. Through the closed door which led into the saloon came the muffled sound of voices, a ceaseless and monotonous noise. Will made another effort to work free of the ropes which held him, but couldn't manage it. There was a sharp, hammering pain in his head. He wondered what he ought to look forward to. Frisco Molly had said they would talk to him again. Frisco Molly! He could still hear the echo of her voice as she had stood over him. Almost laughing at what had happened, pleased at what had been done.

Will suddenly stiffened. He heard the opening of a door but it wasn't the door to the saloon. Light from the outside streaked into the room, then was cut off as the door closed. Footsteps tip-toed forward. Heavy footsteps. Will looked up in the semi-darkness toward the huge bulk of the man who was approaching him. But it wasn't a man. It was a skirted figure. A woman.

"Mista' Stauffa'," whispered a voice. "Mista' Stauffa,' is you able to walk if ah cuts those ropes?"

From her voice and from her size, Will identified the woman as Big Emma, who worked in one of the honkatonks. He had heard some fabulous stories of Big Emma. Of her strength. Of how much she could drink. And of the knife she carried.

"I can walk, Emma," he answered.

The woman stooped over him. The knife in her hand caught under one of the ropes around his body. There was a slight tug and the rope parted.

"Good ol' Jehosaphat," said Emma, chuckling. "I keep him honed like a razor."

She used the knife on another section of the rope, and then on another. Will sat up. He worked himself free.

"How come, Emma?" he asked, still whispering.

"You mean, who done sent me here?" asked the colored woman. "Why, 'course it was Missy Molly."

"Frisco Molly, huh?" said Will, climbing to his feet.

"She say fo' you to get back across the tracks, an' to stay there," Emma continued.

Will felt a little shaky on his feet, but he made it to the back door without too much trouble. Emma opened the door and took a

look outside. She turned back urgently. "You betta' skedaddle, Mista Stauffa," said Emma. "You betta' stay across the tracks like Missy Molly said."

Will nodded. "I'll be back, Emma. Tell your Missy Molly. Be sure to tell her that."

Back in his office, Will Stauffer took his extra gun from the bottom desk drawer, checked it, and dropped it into his holster. Someone across the tracks owed him a gun, but that was a matter he could look into later. There was a mirror on his closet door. He stared at the reflection. No marks of the fight were on his face. The two lumps on his head didn't show, but he could still feel them. The hammering pain wasn't gone.

"McAdams should have seen what happened to me at Donegal's," he thought wryly. "He'd have liked it fine."

Crossing to the window he stared into the street, still thinking of what had happened at Donegal's, and seeing the problem he would face in closing the saloon. Or the problem McAdams would face, no matter how many men he took with him. An open battle could break out between the railroaders and the rest of the town. It could develop into a pretty serious thing, a riot which would leave its deep scars on the town for many years.

There were several range hands lounging in the afternoon shade in front of the Cresta Blanca saloon. As he stood at the window, three more riders came down the main street from the direction of the north valley road, pulled up in front of the Boston store, and dismounted. Two more riders followed them, Ed Garvey and his daughter, Jean. A quick smile cut across Will's face. It was going to be good to see Jean again. He hadn't had a chance to talk with her for almost a week.

LOU FARADAY came into sight, moving up the street, and for some strange reason, a question flashed across Will's mind. If they went ahead and closed up Donegal, who would get Donegal's business? The railroaders wouldn't stop drinking because Donegal's had been closed. They would take their business elsewhere, to one of Granite's three saloons. The Cresta Blanca, the Lucky Seven, or the Silver Dollar. And their most possible choice, at a guess, was Faraday's Silver Dollar. It was the biggest of the three and was closer to Railroad Town than any of the others. It had never been too popular with cattlemen. In fact, only a week or so ago, Will had heard that Faraday had put the Silver Dollar up for sale.

At that time, there had been no public talk of the possibility of closing Donegal's. If the Silver Dollar had been sold it might be interesting to find out who had bought it. Whoever had, might inherit a good business.

Still watching through the window, Will saw Jean Garvey swing down from her horse in front of the Boston store, loop the reins over the tie-rail, and climb the porch steps. She was tall, slender, dark-haired, almost boyish from this distance in her levis and boots and tan sweater. But from a closer view, she was every inch a woman. Graceful. Self-assured. Will had known her for a long time. They had their plans, he and Jean Garvey. Some rather nice plans for the future.

Will moved to the door, then angled across the street, nodding to the men in front of the store as he passed them. One called after him, asking where he was going, and the others laughed at the question they knew to be ridiculous.

Ed Garvey, on the porch, smiled and said, "You'll have supper with us tonight, Will?"

"Any time you wish," Will answered.

Jean was at one of the counters, talking to Sam Munz, who owned the store, and apparently didn't hear him come up behind her. Grinning, Will Stauffer lifted both hands to her shoulders. He leaned forward and growled, "Young lady, you're under arrest."

Jean caught her breath, then twisted free and whirled around to face him, color flaming in her cheeks. "Will," she cried. "Will, if you ever startle me again, I'll—"

"You'll do what?" asked Will laughing.

He reached for Jean's hands and squeezed them, feeling the warmth of her response. He wondered what she would do if he kissed her, right here in the store. But he decided against that. Jean was funny about such things.

"It's about time you came to town," he told her. "I've needed to talk to you."

"And I want to talk to you," said Jean. "What's this I hear about that saloon in Railroad Town."

"Donegal's," said Will, frowning.

"Is there more than one?"

"No," Will admitted. "But what have you heard?"

"We met a man near town who told us the county board has ordered the saloon closed."

"That's what I've heard, too," said Will.

"Might there be trouble."

Will shrugged his shoulders. "There could be."

"You can always appoint deputies, can't you? I mean, you don't have to close the place alone. You can get help."

Will nodded, then said, "Let's not talk about Donegal's. What do you have to do before supper?"

"I've a long list of things to get. Really I have, Will."

It was usually like this when she came to town. A few months ago, in the spring, they had sometimes escaped from town and had taken a walk up river. But for some reason or other, Jean hadn't had time for that lately.

"I'll see you at suppertime, then, at the hotel," said Will, and he tried to keep his disappointment from showing in his voice.

"Come early, if you can," said Jean. "I'll try to finish my errands early."

He felt a lift as he turned away. Felt it in spite of his disappointment. Jean always affected him this way. She brought a grin to his face and he was holding himself straighter as he moved to the door. There was a spring to his walk. Even the hammering pain in his head seemed to have lightened.

On the porch in front of the store, he packed and lit his pipe, glancing up and down the street as he did so. Ed Garvey and Dave McAdams were walking toward the bank. He watched them enter it. Garvey's ranch wasn't as large as McAdams' but Garvey was still one of the important ranchers in the valley. He recalled how that had frightened him at first, and had made him reluctant to call on Jean. But Jean was a very real person, and very practical. "*At your age*," she had pointed out, "*dad didn't own an acre of land, or a single cow. We can start where he and my mother did. We'll do even better. . . .*"

And they would, Will was sure. He already had a start—a small place up on the bench country to the north, a cabin built the year before, a small herd of cattle now running with Garvey's herds, but under his own brand. The money he was making as sheriff, and was saving, would give him the cash he needed to strike out on his own.

A MAN hurrying up the street stopped at Will's office and looked inside. Will started across the street. He called, "Here I am, Billings."

Tom Billings swung around to face him, and waited. He was a thin, undersized man, stoop-shouldered, possibly fifty years old. He had sharp, hawkish features, burning dark eyes. There was a drive in him which was amazing. He was in charge of building the railroad and was pushing it ahead in spite of every difficulty. He was up and down the line constantly, hammering at the job day and night. Will sometimes wondered if Tom Billings ever took any time out to sleep.

"What's this I hear about closing down

Donegal's," he ripped out as Will joined him.

"You know as much about it as I do," Will answered. "I wasn't there, but I heard the county commissioners passed some sort of resolution to that effect, this morning. It's supposed to be written up as a court order, but I haven't seen it yet."

Billings spat out a stream of profanity and half shouted, "What do they want to do? Wreck the road I'm building? Keep every man off the job? I suppose they decided Donegal's was a public nuisance, a threat to the good morale of the community. By damn, a railroader is as fine as a cattleman."

"Tell it to McAdams," said Will, grinning.

"By damn, I will tell McAdams. And I'll tell him something else. If he thinks a court order will close down Donegal, he's making a hell of a mistake. Where do you stand on this?"

"I'm the sheriff, Billings."

"That means you'll do what you're told, huh? Maybe you don't like living."

"You're wrong there," said Will. "But I'm still the sheriff."

"Where will I find McAdams?"

"I think at the bank."

Tom Billings jerked around and started for the bank, his feet scuffling up a trail of dust, his head jutting forward.

Will watched him enter the bank, then turned into his office. It occurred to him that he might be missing something in not witnessing the meeting between Billings and McAdams, for both men could shout and one could be as profane as the other. They would really mix things for a while, but in the end, Billings would accomplish nothing. McAdams was too stubborn a man to heed any warning. He was too far committed to the closing of Donegal's to back down even if he could.

It was half an hour later that Ben Donegal came in through the door. Donegal was a stocky, mild-looking man with twinkling gray eyes and a friendly smile. He dressed modestly. He didn't look like a man who ran a rowdy saloon. There was something almost retiring in his atitude, but Ben Donegal wasn't at all timid. His eyes could harden, his smile disappear, and his mild voice could sharpen like a blasting gun. Will had seen those things happen.

"Hello, Ben."

"You don't want to throw me out?" asked Ben Donegal.

"Not right away," Will answered.

Donegal took a chair near his desk, pulled a cigar from his pocket, precisely clipped off the end with a small knife, and then lit it.

"I'm sorry about what happened down at my place this afternoon," he said slowly. "It wouldn't have happened if I had been there. It won't happen if you come back. Some of the boys were a little heated up. I've had a talk with them."

Will shrugged his shoulders. He said, "Ben, are you going to close down?"

"I don't know," said Donegal. "I don't want to. Suppose I refuse to? What will you do?"

"That's a question I can't answer."

"Or won't answer?"

"Put it that way if you want to. What about the railroaders?"

Ben Donegal smiled. "You shouldn't have to ask me how they feel. Put yourself in their place. They're doing a job, a pretty necessary job. But they're not very well accepted here in Granite. Some are foreigners. They dress rough and talk rough. Until I opened my place they didn't have a place where they could drink and gamble and feel at home. Take it away from them and they're going to be fighting mad. And don't think they can't fight just as hard as any cattleman, or use guns if it comes to that."

"What about this," said Ben slowly. "Faraday's saloon was put up for sale a week or so ago. It's quite large. It's close to the tracks. If you could buy it and close

your place, that might be your answer."

"I'm way ahead of you," said Donegal. "But Faraday's saloon isn't for sale any longer. I've talked to him. Lou Faraday has changed his mind about selling his saloon."

The door opened and Tom Billings looked in. His face was flushed, angry. He called, "Will, how long have we got? How long before Donegal has to shut down?"

"A week, as I understand it," Will answered. "But I haven't yet seen the court order."

"Only a week? Couldn't you stretch that a little."

"I might, with Ben Donegal's cooperation," Will conceeded.

"Then you'll get it, won't he, Donegal?" said Billings.

"I've always thought I was a reasonable man," said Donegal.

"Good," said Billings. "Good. Give me as much time as you can."

He pulled his head back and closed the door and, glancing at Donegal, Will spoke what was in his mind. "What do you reckon he's up to, Ben?"

Donegal said slowly, "I don't know, but he's a smart man, Will. One of the smartest. How could you stall on following the court order."

"Maybe on the basis of the time it would take you to close down and dispose of your stock. Maybe on your promise to close without any trouble on some other set date."

"You think that would work?"

"It might."

Ben Donegal got to his feet. He shook his head, looking worried. He said, "I don't like it, Will. I haven't run such a bad place. I don't think anyone has any right to order me to close down. It could be that I'll refuse to follow the court order."

JUDGE SIMS brought in the court order late that afternoon. Will hadn't doubted that he would receive it. Judge Sims, an old-timer here in Granite, was a friend of every member of the board and always played along with them.

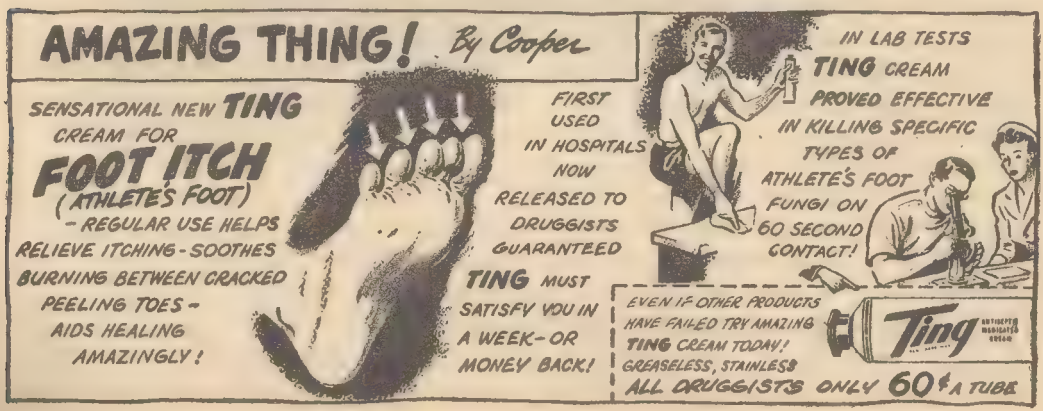
"This order is directed to Ben Donegal," explained the judge, "but it states, explicitly, that if he fails to comply, the county sheriff shall see that the order is executed."

"Thank you, Judge," Will nodded.

The judge cleared his throat. "This is a rather peculiar case. I think I may say to you that Donegal will refuse to comply with the order. In that event I would be glad to approve the appointment of as large a force of deputies as you think will be necessary. A strong show of force will often avoid trouble."

Again Will nodded. "I'll remember that, Judge. Would you be one of my deputies?"

"I certainly will not refuse any call to serve the community," said the judge, stiffening. "But I believe that younger men—"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Will tried to keep his face straight. "Surely, Judge. I understand. But if we run out of younger men, I may call on you."

The judge turned and stalked out of his office, and now Will could let the grin come to the surface. But the court order which lay on his desk wasn't anything to grin about. It could start a fire which might engulf the entire town. Will read it over, then shoved it in one of his desk drawers, out of sight.

SIX days of the week had passed. During that time, Will Stauffer hadn't seen Tom Billings. He had had word from him twice, and each message had been the same: *"Stall. Stall as long as you can."*

Everyone in the valley, and everyone in town on both sides of the track, knew about the court order. Everyone knew, also, about the sign tacked up over Donegal's door, a sign which read:

WE WILL NOT CLOSE

There were rumors along Main street that the railroaders were preparing for battle, that a barrier had been built and was ready to be thrown up across the approaches to Donegal's, that guns had been ordered and brought in. Two days earlier a cattleman venturing across the tracks into Railroad Town, had been beaten up. Will had headed immediately for Donegal's, had brought back two men involved in the affair, and had lodged them in jail. A reported rescue attempt on the part of the railroaders hadn't materialized.

But there was tension in the air, a tension which could be felt as sharply as a winter wind. Late this afternoon, men had started drifting in from the range, just to be on hand, half anticipating trouble ahead of time.

Will Stauffer, moving up to the door of his office, and standing in it, staring into the street, could sense this tension. There was a man lounging in front of the Cresta Blanca saloon whom he hadn't seen before today. A man who was obviously a cattleman, who had probably drifted into town and who was sticking around to see the fun. A seedy looking man of about forty. A man with sharp dark eyes and a scowling face. A man with a low holstered gun. Will had noticed him twice before, both times on the street, both times standing alone.

"Another man for McAdams," he muttered, and shrugged.

Stepping out into the street he headed for Faraday's Silver Dollar saloon, pushed open the door, and stepped inside. Faraday was behind the bar, talking to two men in front of it. He frowned as he saw Will Stauffer, watched Will move to the far end of the bar, then with a seeming reluctance, turned that way.

"What'll it be?" he asked sourly.

"I'm still wondering about why this saloon isn't up for sale any more?" Will answered.

"I told you before," said Faraday. "I changed my mind."

Will nodded. "I know you did, but I've done some checking. Someone who works at the bank told you you owed a pretty stiff note. It's been paid off. It was paid off a week ago. Now I wonder how you managed that? Could it be you took a partner?"

"If I took a partner, that's my business," snapped Faraday. "Do you want a drink, or don't you?"

"Who's the partner?" asked Will. "Who bought into what might be a good business after we close down Donegal?"

"Do you want a drink, or don't you?"

Will stared at the man thoughtfully, wondering how he could persuade him to talk. Since this morning, when he had learned about Faraday's note at the bank, which had been paid off, he had been sure Faraday had taken a partner. Or Faraday might even have sold the saloon out-

right. What he wanted to know, now, was the name of the man who had put up the necessary money. How such information could help him, he wasn't sure, but it was a part of the total picture. Whoever had bought into the Silver Dollar, stood a good chance of cleaning up after Donegal's was closed, for it was in the cards that most of the railroaders would bring their business here.

"Well, do you want a drink, or don't you?" Faraday was asking again.

"No drink," said Will. "I want a name, Faraday. A name."

The man shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about. I own the Silver Dollar myself."

"I still want a name," said Will slowly. "And I'll get it. Watch your step, Faraday."

He turned away, afraid that his last words had been a hollow threat, but still puzzling over the question as to who had bought into the Silver Dollar.

CHAPTER THREE

Blood on the Dollar

JEAN GARVEY and her father had come to town during the afternoon and, as was his custom, Will had supper with them at the hotel. Garvey seemed worried. He had been able to feel the tension in the town.

"Isn't there any way to avoid this fight that's building up?" he asked bluntly. "Couldn't Tom Billings appeal to the railroad men? Where is he, anyhow?"

Will shrugged his shoulders. "There's one way to avoid the fight. One sure way."

"What's that?"

"Give Donegal another week. He's agreed to close down in another week."

"He doesn't need another week to close down. Faraday's made a cash offer for all his stock, with a decent bonus for good will."

"Where did Faraday get the money?"

"How should I know. But that's not the point. The county board can't back down on its order. No one would respect the law if they did. It seems to me the person to talk to is Tom Billings. I'd still like to know where he is."

Will would've liked to have known, too. He had tried to stall off the execution of the court order, but so far had failed. There was a chance he might succeed tomorrow. The merchants in Granite were getting worried. Men like Sam Munz at the Boston Store, and Rickard at the livery stable, and Carlson who owned this hotel. Those men and others were alarmed at the prospect of an open break between the railroaders and the town.

After supper, Jean walked back to the office with him and, after unlocking the door, Will drew her into the darkened room and took her in his arms. He hadn't been sure how she would respond, for she had been silent during the meal—almost unfriendly—but here, in the deep shadows, she gripped him tightly and there was a warm sweetness in her lips and the sharp promise of passion. For an instant Will forgot all about Donegal and what might happen tonight, or tomorrow. But only for an instant.

"Will," Jean whispered. "Will, what's going to happen about Donegal's?"

"I don't know," Will answered "I honestly don't."

"Do you think he'll refuse to close down tomorrow?"

"I'm almost sure of it."

"Then what will you do?"

He had no answer for her. He didn't know what he would do.

"I know what you could do," Jean was saying. "Send for Donegal, tonight. He would come here to see you. When he does, arrest him. Put him in jail. Without Donegal, the railroaders would have no leader."

"Arrest him?" said Will frowning. "But

why, Jean? Donegal's done nothing wrong. You can't arrest a man because you want to."

"He's done nothing wrong!" cried the girl, drawing away. "He's defied the order to close down."

"He hasn't defied it if he closes down tomorrow night."

"But you could still find an excuse to arrest him."

"What excuse, Jean?"

"Any excuse. Why do you have to have an excuse?"

Will scowled at the girl. This was a Jean he didn't know. There was an unreasoning drive in what she was asking. He couldn't understand it.

"Everyone has equal rights under the law, Jean," he said slowly. "It would be as right to arrest your father or Dave McAdams as to arrest Ben Donegal."

"But they're on the right side."

"Right?" said Will. "Is it right for Faraday to sell a railroader a drink, and wrong for Donegal? Where is the difference?"

"You forget the women," said Jean bitterly.

"The honkatonk women? What about Mary Cross and Sue Hardesty? They came to Granite before the railroaders. They live in our part of town. Maybe you haven't heard of them, but a good many people—"

Jean caught her breath. She turned swiftly to the door and hurried away.

Will watched her disappear up the street. He felt for his pipe and put it into his mouth, but didn't light it. He was all mixed up inside. He was afraid that something fine in the relationship between him and Jean had just been lost and might never be found again. There was a bitter and unpleasant taste in his mouth.

He turned back into his office, then, without lighting the lamp, swung to the door again, stepped out, pulled the door shut and angled toward Faraday's Silver Dollar. He had just passed the bank corner when someone called his name and he turned to look back over his shoulder.

A man was hurrying after him but as Will looked back, the man stopped and his arm whipped up and a flash of light stabbed from the barrel of his gun. There had been no warning. Will clawed at his holster, but even as he pulled his gun free a smashing blow seemed to strike against the side of his head and his knees caved in. He heard another shot as he was falling. In the pale, half-light from the sky, he caught a glimpse of an ugly, scowling face, and recognized it. The man who had shot him was the stranger he had noticed earlier today across from his office, the fellow he had labeled as a drifting cowhand.

The killer lowered his gun, took a quick look up and down the street, and started running toward the tracks, toward Railroad Town. Will tried to lift his gun and send a shot after him, but couldn't. He heard men shouting, heard footsteps hammering up the street, but the sounds faded out in a thickening darkness.

WHEN consciousness returned to him he realized he had been carried into the Silver Dollar saloon and that quite a crowd had gathered. He could hear the rumbling murmur of many voices. He looked around, dazed at first, and still trying to hold his grip on what was happening. The pain was there in his head again, a pain similar to the one he had felt a week ago. He raised his hand and felt the bandage wrapped around his skull. Someone told him to take it easy. Someone held him down when he tried to sit up.

Then a voice, louder than the others, cut across the lifting noises in the room, a roaring voice, commanding attention. Although unable to see the man who was speaking, Will knew instantly that it was McAdams.

"This does it, men," McAdams was shouting. "It was a railroader who shot

Will Stauffer. I've talked to three men who were close enough to see what happened. All of them saw the fellow heading back across the tracks, back to Donegal's probably. The county board has ordered Donegal to shut down. What are we going to do about it?"

"Close him down tonight!" someone yelled.

Others took up the cry.

"Tonight! Tonight!"

"Just a minute, fellows," shouted McAdams. "We'll not cross the tracks as a mob. Every man who goes with us will be an authorized deputy. Since we don't have a sheriff, I'll swear you in. As chairman of the county board, I'm authorized to do that. Line up in front of the bar."

Will Stauffer sat up, pushing aside the hands which would have held him. He shoved his way through the crowd of men to the bar and turned and leaned against it, glad of it's support. He raised his voice in a roaring imitation of Dan McAdams.

"Who says you haven't got a sheriff? What's the matter with me?"

There was an immediate roar of approval from the men in the room.

"Swear us in, Will!" shouted a man standing near him. "The whole damned town will cross the tracks with you."

Will raised his hands for silence. He glanced swiftly at McAdams who was standing down the bar from him, a dark and heavy scowl on his face.

"Listen!" Will shouted. "Listen to me, all of you. It wasn't a railroader who shot me. I saw the man. I know him. When I face him again, I'll name him."

Will paused. He sucked in a long, deep breath. There was hardly a sound in the room. His words had apparently startled everyone here.

"One thing more," he added. "I know all about the order to Donegal to close down, but the order gives him until tomorrow night. If we crossed the tracks tonight, we are the ones who would be breaking the law. We're not crossing the tracks."

"We've got a sheriff who's afraid to cross the tracks," snapped McAdams.

Will Stauffer's right hand dropped down to touch his holster. His gun was there. The men who had carried him in here had found it, and replaced it. He swung to face McAdams.

"Say that again," he snapped. "And when you say it, prove it."

The men standing near McAdams moved swiftly out of the way of a possible bullet. There was a similar movement behind Will. McAdams had stiffened. His hand, half lifted, had moved close to his gun. There was an almost shocked look in his beady black eyes. He hadn't expected this. He was startled, and showed it.

Then, near him, there was a movement in the crowd, and Ed Garvey and several others surged between them, Garvey shouting that this had all been a mistake, and that the thing to do was stick together, and wait for tomorrow night.

Will wasn't too sorry. He still felt shaky from the wound in the side of his head. He wasn't sure how quickly he could have whipped up his gun.

He called to one of the men standing near him, and said, "Ollie, get me out of here. I think I could do with a breath of fresh air."

AN HOUR later, reasonably sure McAdams wouldn't try anything more tonight, Will Stauffer crossed the tracks and headed for Donegal's. Halfway there three men, closing in on him through the darkness, blocked his way. Beyond them, in the shadows, were other figures, silent, menacing.

"Where do you think you're going?" growled a voice.

"To see Ben Donegal," Will answered.

He stood rigid, waiting, one hand on his gun. He could feel the chilly moisture of perspiration on his body. He hadn't

expected anything like this. In spite of the growing tension between the two divisions of the town, he had never been stopped like this on other nights when he had crossed the tracks.

Someone else came up. A match flamed in a cupped hand, lighting up his face, then was extinguished.

"Let him pass," said a voice, a woman's voice. "It's the sheriff. Ben will want to see him. I'll go with him the rest of the way."

The speaker was Frisco Molly, the copper-haired faro dealer. He felt her hand touch his arm.

"This way, Sheriff," she said.

They passed through the group of silent, shadowy figures and turned between two of the new, frame dormitory shacks. Molly was wearing a long, dark coat. A scarf was tied over her hair. In the darkness it was impossible to see more than the outline of her face.

"So they're on guard tonight," said Will.

"We had a warning there might be trouble," the girl answered. "There's a certain ranch hand who's crazy about one of the honkatonk girls. He came to see her early tonight. He talked too much."

Will nodded. He could draw an ugly inference from what this girl had said. An hour ago, someone had tried to kill him. A crowd had gathered almost immediately and McAdams, acting in his place, had been on the point of deputizing them and leading them across the tracks. Someone had known this in advance, as though the entire scheme had been carefully planned.

"How long have your guards been posted?" Will asked.

"Since shortly after dark."

"About an hour ago two shots were fired near the Silver Dollar saloon. Immediately afterwards, a man came running this way. Do you know anything about that?"

"Ben Donegal might," said the girl.

Will took a quick look at her. She was almost his own height, slender, attractive.

"About the other night, Molly," he said with an effort. "I haven't had the chance to thank you for the way you stepped in and stopped those men from kicking me senseless."

"I've heard since that you'd like to get your hands on my throat," said the girl, and Will could imagine she was smiling.

He grinned. He said, "You've a nice throat, Molly."

The girl made no answer to that, but she didn't seem to draw away.

"What will you do when Donegal closes down?" Will asked.

"He may not close down."

"But if he does?"

The girl shrugged. "There are other towns, other gambling houses."

"And I suppose you can't do anything but deal faro."

She stopped. She swung to face him. "What's wrong with dealing faro? Don't tell me it's a man's job. I can out-deal any man I know."

There was an edge of anger in her voice. Will's grin had faded. After all, he was asking himself, why shouldn't a woman deal faro?

"Let me tell you this," Molly was saying. "I can make more money dealing faro than I could at any other job I could get. Why shouldn't I want the money?"

"Why do you want it?" asked Will.

"I had enough poverty as a child. My father — oh, shut up!"

Will reached out and touched her arm. He said, "Sorry, Molly. Let's not fight about it. You can deal faro until you're old and gray."

"Until I'm old and gray?" said Molly, and suddenly she was laughing. "No thank you, Mr. Sheriff. I don't think I'll want to deal faro that long."

BEN DONEGAL'S office was above his bar and storeroom. He was sitting at his desk when Will and Molly came in.

He didn't seem surprised to see them.

"Here's another man we caught sneaking across the tracks," said Molly, smiling.

"Sneaking?" said Donegal.

"Well, not exactly. But here he is."

Donegal was worrying a half-smoked cigar. His eyes were red-webbed. Ashes had spilled over his vest.

"How about it, Will? Anything new?"

"Plenty," Will answered. "I'm looking for a man who headed into Railroad Town a little more than an hour ago. Maybe you can help me find him."

"Why?"

"Molly tells me you had a warning that the cattlemen might try to close you down tonight."

"We did."

"About an hour ago a man tried to kill me. Knocked me out. I came to as McAdams was deputizing a crowd to lead across the tracks. What does sound like to you?"

"It sounds as though McAdams was in an awful hurry to close me down. What's he so bitter about?"

"Someone has bought out Faraday. Maybe McAdams. Maybe he wants to make it into a railroaders' saloon."

Will scowled. That was true enough, but the other facts remained. If the bullet which had only stunned him had killed him instead, McAdams would have led a crowd of men this way. And it had been planned that that would happen. A warning of it had reached Donegal's ears.

"I'd still like to talk to the man who tried to kill me," said Will. "I'd like to know what he has to say."

Donegal glanced at Molly. He said, "Molly, tell Wes and Curley to bring up the man we're holding."

The girl nodded and left the room.

"Then you've got him?" said Will.

"About an hour ago a man came running across the tracks. It was just after some shooting. Some of the boys grabbed him and brought him here. He says his name is Traubel. He says he came here to get a job on the railroad, but he doesn't look like a railroad man to me. He wears a gun. Said he's done some range riding."

Molly came back to the room. Following her were three men, one bound and half carried by the other two. Ben nodded when he saw him. Here was the man who had tried to kill him and who had fled toward Railroad Town, only to fall into Donegal's hands. A man who had said his name was Traubel.

Propped in a chair, Traubel looked around the room. His eyes centered on Will Stauffer and looked quickly away.

"You're not a very good shot, are you?" said Will, touching the bandage on his head. Blood had seeped from below it and dried on his face, but he didn't know it.

The man moistened his lips. His eyes widened as Will drew his gun.

"You've got just ten seconds to tell me who hired you."

Perspiration stood out on Traubel's face. Will squeezed the trigger of his gun and Traubel screamed. Blood trickled slowly from a nick in the top of his ear.

"The next shot will be right between your eyes," said Will. "I don't really need the man's name. I know it."

A whisper of sound came from Traubel's throat.

Suddenly his eyes glazed, and he tipped forward and sprawled to the floor in a faint.

"Did you hear what he said?" asked Will, glancing at Donegal.

"Sounded like McAdams to me," said Donegal.

"It was McAdams," said Molly.

The girl looked a little pale herself. She moved back and leaned against the wall and kept watching Will Stauffer, her eyes thoughtful.

The door burst open and Tom Billings came in. He was almost breathless, as usual. His sharp, dark eyes circled the

room, noting the man on the floor and the gun still in Will's hand.

"Who's killed him?" he demanded.

"We haven't come to that yet," said Will. "I was just practicing."

Another man had followed Billings into the room. A tall gray-haired man of about sixty, and dressed in an expensively-tailored suit.

"This is Mr. Collison, Arthur J. Collison, of Denver," said Billings. "He's one of the chief stockholders in the railroad. He's got something interesting to tell us."

"Interesting?" said Collison, his square stubborn face coloring. "It should be interesting. We've got only so much money to build the road. It's running low. Billings thinks we can make it on what's left, but any delay now would drive us into bankruptcy. Our stock might pay out at twenty cents on the dollar."

"In plain language," said Billings, "what he means is this. A battle here in Granite could wreck the building of the road. A crowd could move in and buy up the stock at a fifth of its value. Recently a Denver man, representing some unnamed group, has been establishing the necessary credit to do just that. His contacts have been traced to the Granite State Bank. I guess everyone here knows who owes most of the bank."

"Dave McAdams," said Donegal.

Tom Billings nodded. He said, "All right, what do we do about it?"

BY TEN o'clock the next morning the day was already hot. Will Stauffer sat in his office with the doors and window open. Now and then he got up and paced the floor, feeling the weight of a nagging impatience. Several men looked in, but not the man he was waiting for. Not Dave McAdams.

He was alone here, but in the jail behind his office was the man named Traubel. And down the street in Faraday's Silver Dollar saloon, were Tom Billings, Ben Donegal, Faraday, and the man from Denver, Arthur Collison. Faraday had been a mighty unhappy man when they had collared him early this morning and had told him what they expected. He was probably still unhappy.

Will fingered the bandage around his head, a new bandage which Molly had fixed there. A smile crossed his face and some of his tension slid away. He leaned back in his chair and wondered what she was doing this morning.

A shadow filled the doorway. A man stood there, looking in at him. A voice said, "Well, Stauffer, this is the day."

Will Stauffer straightened. He looked up at Dave McAdams. He said, "What day?"

"You know what I mean," McAdams snapped. "This is the day Donegal's going to close down. A good many of us want to know what you're going to do about it."

"What am I going to do about it?" asked Will. "Why, nothing."

"Nothing?" roared McAdams.

"That's right," Will nodded. "I'm not going to do a thing. Donegal closed down last night."

McAdams planted himself before Will's desk, glaring down at him.

"What's Donegal going to do? What are the railroaders going to do?"

"The answer to that is simple," said Will. "Ben Donegal is going to lease and run the Silver Dollar saloon. It's just that simple. There'll be no trouble."

McAdams' eyes had widened. There was an ugly flush of color in his face. "The Silver Dollar!" he roared. "Faraday's Silver Dollar! It isn't for rent."

"But it's going to be," said Will, "for you own it, and you're going to lease it to Donegal."

"Like hell I am!"

"But you are, for if you don't, the man who tried to kill me last night is going to tell publicly, in court, who paid him to do the job. And a man named Arthur J. Col-

lison, from Denver, is going to expose to the businessmen of Granite the scheme to wreck the building of the railroad, drive down the price of the stock, and take over the ownership of the line. He's here, and he's got all the facts at his fingertips. I've a message for you, McAdams. Faraday, Donegal and Tom Billings are waiting down at the Silver Dollar to arrange the lease. Collison is there, too. He wants to talk to you. If the lease is arranged and if there is a guarantee of no more trouble, Collison will go back to Denver without talking too much."

McAdams' eyes held a shocked and startled look. His mouth moved up and down several times, but no words came from his lips. He mopped his hand over his face, then shook his head as though unwilling to believe what he had heard.

"They're getting impatient, McAdams," said Will sharply. "If you don't want people in this town to know about the man you paid to kill me, if you don't want them to know about the raid you planned on the railroad stock, get down to the Silver Dollar and sign it over to Donegal."

McAdams moistened his lips. His hand dropped to his gun, then fell away. He turned to the door, and from there, looked back.

"We'll see about this, Stauffer," he rumbled. "We'll see about it. You haven't heard the last of me yet."

They were brave words, but the tone in which they were spoken was hollow and meaningless.

GRANITE was startled at the news that Donegal had leased Faraday's saloon, but there was an undercurrent of relief at the promise that there would be no trouble. The ruling of the county board had been satisfied. Its authority had not been defied. Donegal had stated, publicly, that there would be no women hanging around the Silver Dollar, and this surface tribute to morality was acceptable.

"But what about Molly?" Will asked Ben Donegal that evening in the Silver Dollar saloon.

"She knew she couldn't stay with me when we opened up in town," Donegal replied. "There's nothing wrong with a woman faro dealer, but some folks would never believe that. If we've got to seem respectable, we'll seem respectable."

"But what will she do?"

"Go somewhere else, maybe. Or maybe

He made the best, desperate gamble he could. . . .

take some other job. You can never be sure what a woman will do."

"Where is she now?" asked Will.

"She told me about an hour ago that she wanted to say good-by to some of the girls."

Will shook his head. He turned toward the door.

"You're not going down there, are you?" called Donegal. "After all, Will, there are some things a respectable young man just doesn't do."

"Shut up," snapped Will.

And then he looked back. Ben Donegal was laughing at him.

There was a wide porch on the front of the house. Ben climbed the steps, knocked on the door, and then stood waiting in the darkness, wondering what he would say to Molly. Curiously, this hadn't occurred to him until right now, and he found himself puzzled. Why had he wanted to see the girl? Why had he come rushing here in such a hurry? What would he say to her when he saw her? Nowhere in his

mind could be find the answer to these questions.

The door opened. Light streamed out at him and against the background of the hallway he saw Big Emma.

"You, Mista Stauffa?"

"Suppose you just do this," said Will, grinning. "Find Molly and tell her I want to see her. Tell her I'm waiting on the porch."

She hurried away, leaving the door partially open, and after she was gone Will reached into his pocket for his pipe. He put it to his lips, then searched for a match, and suddenly stiffened.

"Stauffer!" called a voice from the darkness behind him. "Stauffer, I told you you hadn't heard the last of me."

The words were low, but clear. There was a lashing anger in the voice that spoke them. There was bitterness and triumph. There was the promise of death. Will's hand was close to his holstered gun but he was afraid he might never be able to reach it. He knew who stood behind him. It was Dave McAdams. Although beaten, McAdams would still have his measure of victory, his secret satisfaction of revenge.

Light from the hallway touched Will's shoulder, outlined his body. He could whirl around, but the moment he moved, McAdams might fire. Here, with none to see, there was no reason McAdams had to give him an even break.

"Turn around, Stauffer," called the voice behind him. "Turn around. I've got something for you."

Will tried desperately to place McAdams by the sound of his voice. "Now?" he asked hoarsely. "Do I turn now?"

"Yes, now!"

A man couldn't figure his way out of a thing like this. He took what narrow chance he had. He made the best, desperate gamble he could. Will Stauffer whirled around, diving for the floor, clawing at his holder. He saw the flash of McAdam's gun felt a bullet jerk at his shoulder, felt the searing, stinging pain of it. He fired at the hulking figure in the shadows, fired again, and a third time. He heard McAdams's hoarse scream of pain and thought he saw the man reeling backwards, but wasn't sure. His eyes strained to probe the darkness where McAdams had stood. Then Molly's voice reached him, and suddenly she was stooping over him, lifting him in her arms and screaming to Emma for help.

"Get back inside," Will shouted. "He's out there. McAdams is out there."

"Then we'll both get inside," said Molly, practically.

But they didn't, for Emma who had hurried outside at Molly's call, stared into the darkness, then moved down the steps. Some distance away she stooped over, then straightened again.

"This man out here ain't no one to be afraid of," she called back. "He ain't no one to be afraid of, ever."

Will looked up at Molly, abruptly conscious of the warmth of her arms and the shielding position of her body. From somewhere deep in his mind came the knowledge that this was what he wanted, that this was why he had come down here.

A smile broke across his face and he said, "Hello, Molly. It's me, again. Will Stauffer."

Color flooded the girl's face. She drew away, stood up. And Will climbed to his feet and faced her.

"I just came down to tell you you're under arrest," he said, still smiling.

"Under arrest?" gasped Molly.

Will nodded.

"But why?"

"I was afraid you'd leave town," Will answered. "You've got to stay around for a while, until I get to know you better."

Anger flashed in Molly's eyes, but then, confused with it, was a dancing merriment, and Will had the sudden feeling that everything was going to work out all right.

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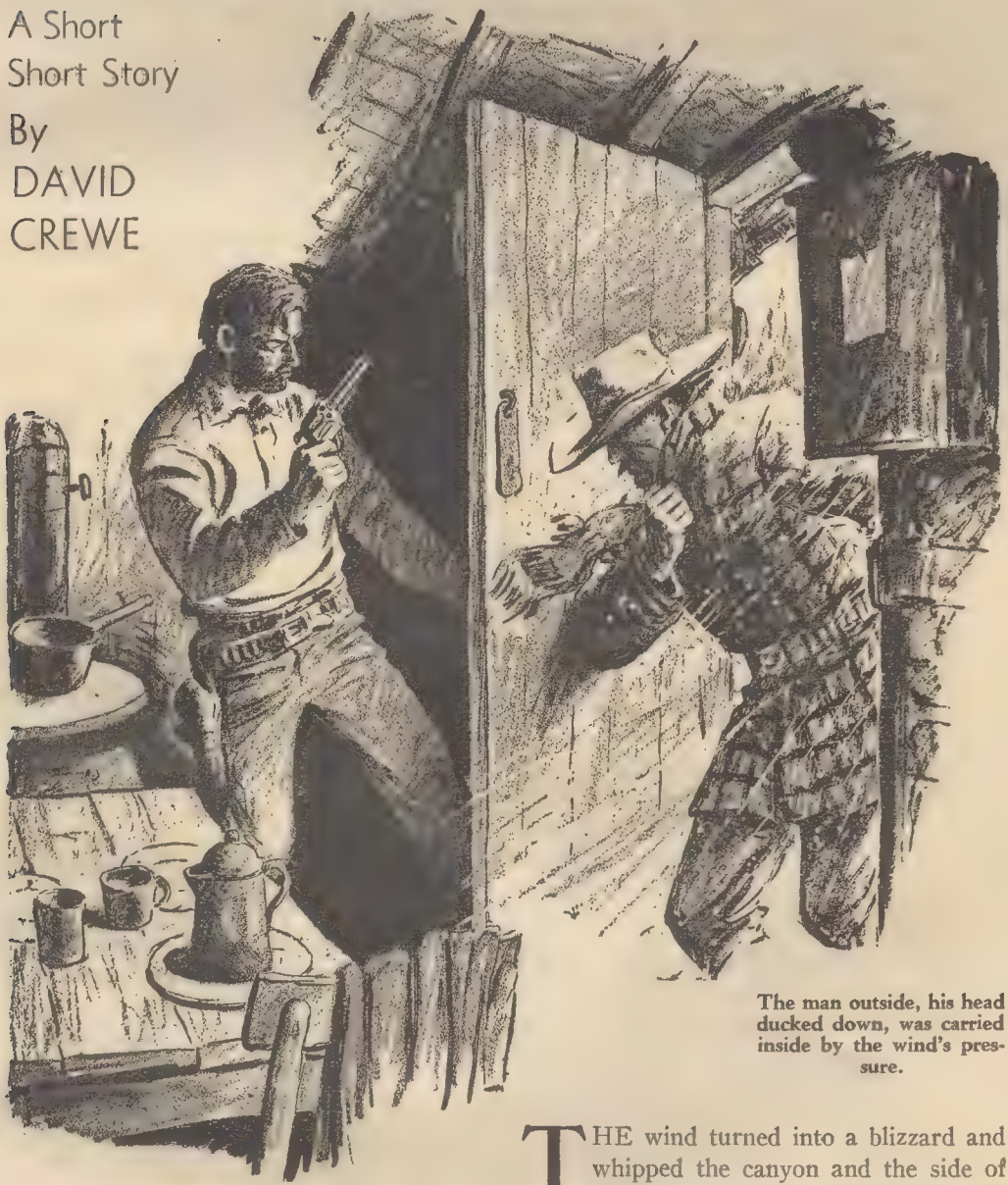
NAILED!

A Short Short Story

By DAVID CREWE



The man outside, his head ducked down, was carried inside by the wind's pressure.

Zack had left no trail for the law to follow—other than accounting for every second of the twenty years he hadn't lived!

THE wind turned into a blizzard and whipped the canyon and the side of the mountain with unleashed fury. It ate savagely at the chinked and mud-daubed log cabin that faced the deep abutment of rock wall.

Zack Turner got out of bed and swung his socked feet to the icy floor, reaching for his cowhide boots. The cold cut like a knife.

He judged the coming daylight by the grayness of the ice-scaled windows. He dressed as rapidly as possible, then buckled his six-shooter around his middle. He went to the stove and built a fire, then set a bucket of water that was half ice on the stove to thaw out. In a few minutes bacon was frying and coffee was boiling. Zack began to get warm in the little ten by twelve cabin and shed his overcoat. He grinned as he sat down to breakfast. The blizzard was an ally to Zack Turner! It came like an answer to prayer.

Zack ate bacon, hot biscuits and sugar syrup, and drank several cups of black coffee. He liked the wail of the wind, its howl in the depth of the canyon. It gave him security against visitors from the sawmill down the mountain or hunters dropping in. . . .

He had killed an elk the day before and the meat was frozen just out the door. His supply of tobacco would last for months and the hard hand of winter was welcome.

Zack's thoughts were jolted by a knock on the door. He swung like a panther, tipping his chair over, and lifting his gun from the holster. His eyes narrowed.

"Who is it?" Zack called.

"I'm lost!" a wind-whipped voice answered. "I want in out of the storm!" The words were barely discernible against the sweeping storm.

Zack opened the door a scant inch, leaning against it as the fury of the blizzard forced it against his body. The man outside, his head ducked down, was carried inside by the wind's pressure. He closed the door behind him with the weight of his body against it.

The eyes of the two men locked and held.

"Sorry to force my way in on you like this," the man said, sensing the inhospitable welcome. "But a man couldn't live in that for long!" He waved his hand indicating the storm.

"I don't like company, mister!" Zack answered. "I've lived alone here for twenty years, and I'm going to keep it that way."

The stranger lifted his lip in the form of a grin that didn't show in his eyes. His face was drawn with the cold. A stubble of beard, ice covered, obscured his jaw line. His eyebrows were white from frost.

"I'll pay you for something to eat." The man's mouth assumed its stern, normal look. He began to turn back the collar of his sheep-lined coat that was turned up to his hat brim.

Zack's eyes dropped and he lowered the gun.

"I don't want your money," Zack said. "Eat, then get going—there's a sawmill down the mountain."

WHEN the newcomer sat down to the table Zack took the ax from behind the wood box. He tested the edge with his thumb.

"Let me chop the wood," the man offered. "I'd like to do something to show my appreciation."

"I've used this ax for twenty years." The slitted eyes of Zack looked at the man eating. "It's still got the same handle I bought with it. No, mister, you can't use my ax."

Zack went out in the storm.

Moving to the stove for warmth the stranger heard Zack chopping. He noted the rhythmic fall of the ax against pine, sensed the bite of the blade into the wood. He began to clear the table, putting the dishes in the tin dishpan, setting water on to heat. In moving the frying pan he spilled some of the grease on the stove. It smoked, and smelled foully.

Zack came in, his left arm cradling a stack of wood. He corded it in the wood box a stick at a time.

"You spattered grease all over the stove!" Zack announced querulously.

"I'll clean it up, pardner. Just waiting for the water to heat." The man's grin was a little more understanding. He knew how it was with these hermits of the hills. They

only wanted solitude—to be let alone. They had a deep resentment against any member of society, any one of that group they had renounced. They did not want their self-imposed privacy invaded.

As soon as I clean up the dishes I'll shove down the mountain," the man concluded.

Zack was relieved and showed it. He went out again and the stranger began to wash the dishes. With a grin he cleaned the stove. He realized that it was the first good cleaning the stove had had in many moons. He even washed the dish rag. Finished, he hung the dishpan on a nail near the stove.

When Zack came in, the blizzard had increased and the door was nearly torn from its leather hinges as the latch was lifted. A whirl of powdered snow swept the plank floor, forming a series of ripples that quickly melted as the heat moved over them. Zack showed his resentment that the man was still there. He squatted before the wood box, cording the stove-length wood carefully. Done, he stood up, his eyes wandering over the cabin, looking for something with which to find fault. His eyes lit upon the dishpan near the stove. Anger flashed in his eyes, his mouth cut to a sneer.

"The dishpan don't belong there, feller!" Zack announced. Then his voice modulated as he saw the man pushing his arms into the heavy sheep skin coat. He moved the dishpan to another nail. "That pan has been hanging right there for twenty years. Guess I'm a little set in my ways—old habits—but I don't want to change them." His eyes narrowed again. "You've ate, now move on. Don't be here when I come back!" Zack turned and walked out of the door.

"Thanks for the grub, old-timer," the man called to Zack's back.

THE stranger crossed the cabin to a point where he would be behind the door when Zack returned. He removed a six-shooter from a shoulder holster and thumbed out the cylinder, inspecting it. He let the hammer down on the one empty chamber, recocking the gun so that a cartridge came under the hammer.

He listened for the sound of the ax, then heard chopping. Unconsciously he counted the number of times the blade bit wood. When the chopping stopped he estimated the time it would take Zack to kneel and pile the wood in the cradle of his arm, how long it would take him to walk to the door. His estimate was close; as Zack arrived at the door as the man's mental picture put him there. The man took a deep breath, held it for a second, then let it out.

Zack lifted the latch string and the door blew open. Snow blew to the far wall, laying a design on the floor. Zack's heel hooked around the bottom of the door, levering it so his back could close it.

It was when he turned that Zack spotted the man, saw the six-shooter pointed just a trifle up to catch the heart. Zack's face didn't change in expression, but the load of wood sagged in his arm. Again the eyes of the two men locked.

"We'll take the walk out together, Turner," the man said. "You're wanted over in Red Lodge for bank robbery. Twenty years is a long time, Zack, when you have to spend it in the Big House!"

After the sheriff had reached around him and unbuckled his gun, Zack asked the one question on his mind.

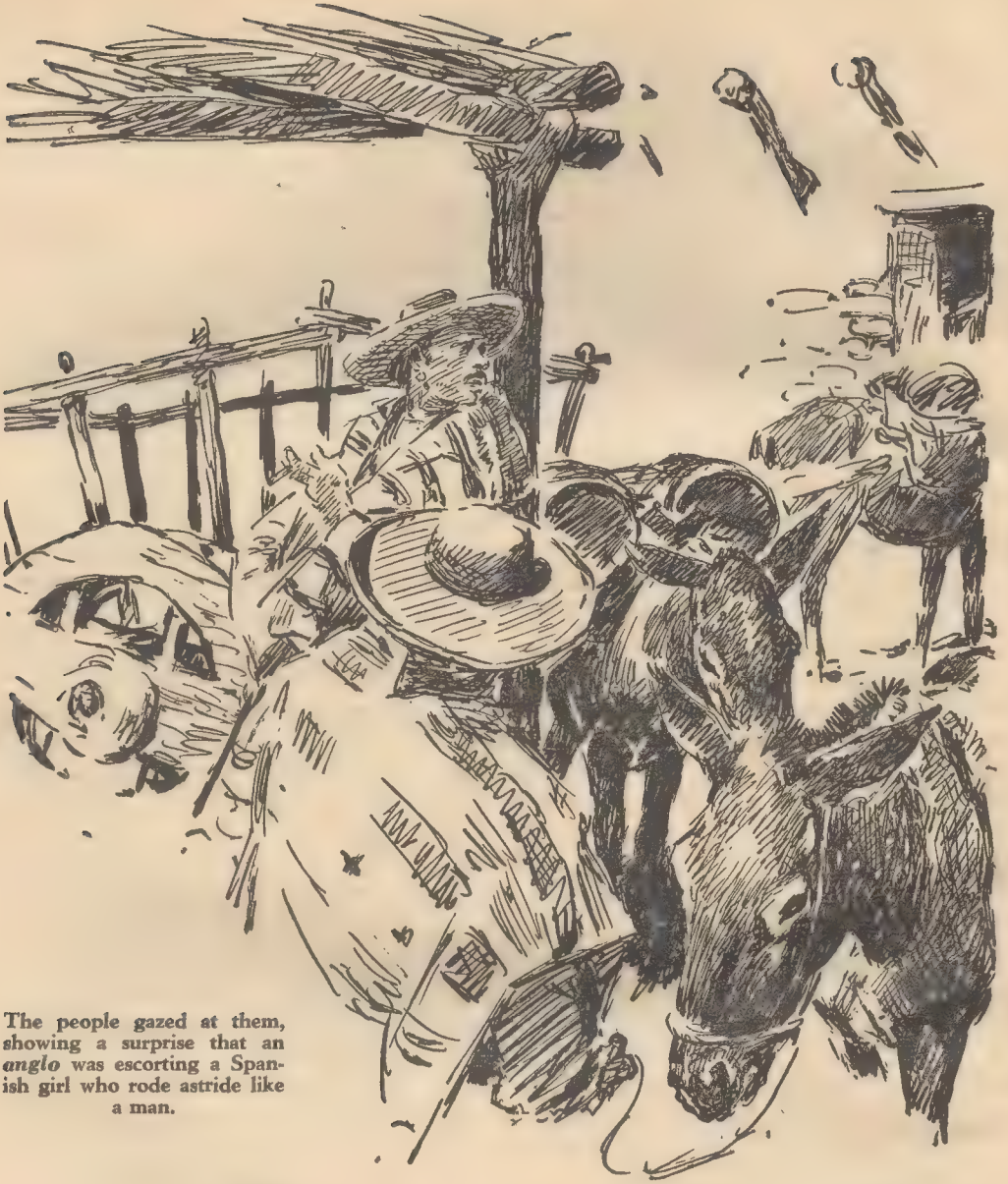
"How did you know, lawdog?"

"You run off at the head just once too many times, Zack." The sheriff kicked Zack's gun into a corner. "See that nail where you been hanging the dishpan for twenty years? I drove that nail in the wall to hang my coat on less than an hour ago!"

"Let's start moving," Zack said. He started for the door.

"A feller can get overly careful sometimes," the sheriff said as he followed Zack outside. The wind whipped the officer's words down the canyon, but Zack heard him.

Neither realized that they had left the door open. . . . ● ● ●



The people gazed at them, showing a surprise that an *anglo* was escorting a Spanish girl who rode astride like a man.

Lovely as tomorrow, warm as a flame —and secret as death she was . . . the girl who gave Steve Douglas his life in the desert—and asked for it back the first night they met in bullet-ridden Nacozari. . . .

DAYLIGHT drew a gray streak across the sky as the man and girl came to the foot of Mesa El Toro. A swale of green grass led them to the foot of the desert oasis, hidden by a wild berry thicket and clumps of buckbrush. The girl slid from the horse's back and the man unsaddled the Indian pony and turned it loose to graze.

It took some work with a hand machete

By DOC WINCHESTER

HELL IN NACOZARI

to clear passage to the water. While the man hacked at the tough undergrowth, the girl fell instantly asleep in the shade of the rank vegetation. Glancing at her face he noted the exhaustion that sagged her mouth, spilled over her sprawled arms, and settled with almost lifeless finality over her body.

He hacked with renewed energy at the mass of tangled growth. In an hour it would be hotter than hell. With a final effort he gained the cool spring. Belly to ground, he drank. Filling his hat with the good water he carried it to the girl.

"Señorita!" He spoke softly, not to startle her too abruptly from the deep sleep.

Her head turned to him, the eyelids flickered for an instant, then opened slowly. Her lips parted, showing her even, white teeth.

"Gracias, señor!" She drank from the water-soaked hat. Finished, she shook the

hair back from her face and, leaning her weight against her spread hands she looked at him wonderingly.

"You name, *señorita*?" he asked.

"I am Antonia Consuela Ortez y Romero." She rolled the name on her tongue.

"Suffering rattlesnakes!" the man answered. "May I call you just Tony?"

"*Esta bueno.* And you?" She gave her head another toss, her eyes on his face.

"I'm Steve Douglas. Just whittle it down to Steve."

"Esteban! That ees a pretty name, no?" She was still smiling and going through the gesture of tossing her head.

"Have your own way about it," Steve answered. He rolled to his stomach after giving her another drink and taking one himself. "Better go below the spring and take a bath—at least wash that muck off your face." He settled down to sleep.

She sat unmoving, making no attempt to follow his suggestion.

"Go on!" he said a little impatiently. "You're safe. I wouldn't move to see the queen of Egypt haul Moses out of the bullrushes!"

When he awoke it was hot. He was thirsty, damnably hungry, and his arm had stiffened from the bullet hole in it. Sitting up he looked around. The pony had found the water and was feeding avidly. He sat for a moment, then called her.

"Tony!" He listened, then heard her answer.

"Esteban!" She gave the name its full Spanish flavor.

"Hell!" Steve grumbled. "I'll bet I get that greaser name tacked on me for the rest of my life."

She came to him and he got to his feet. "See!" She was holding her skirt by the hem. "I got food, no?" She had gathered a large quantity of *piñon* nuts.

They fell to eating the rich nuts. Tony had managed to freshen up and her hair was arranged so that it looked very becoming. She had smoothed out the wrinkles from her dress and cleaned her shoes.

Steve began to look at the nuts with distaste.

"You got gringo stomach," Tony offered unfeelingly, still munching and cracking the nuts with her teeth. Then: "When do we come to Nacozari, Esteban?"

"Three or four days—with luck," Steve answered.

"*Madre de Dios!*" Tony's shoulders sagged in a gesture of despair.

IT WAS sundown when they left the spring. Earlier, Steve had killed a couple of cottontails and they had a good meal. Steve took it afoot, Tony riding the horse. He walked for some time and the soreness began to leave his arm. He thought it a good time to find out a little more about the girl he was escorting across the desert. What little he had gathered didn't give him much of a picture. For the second night now they had moved southwest, resting during the day, headed for Nacozari, in the state of Sonora, Mexico. The girl had told him that Nacozari was her home.

That, and the fact that he had rescued her from a raided mule train, was the extent of his knowledge. The rescue had cost him an annoying bullet hole in the arm. The mule train out of Sante Fe had been held up and the muleskinner killed by two masked bandits. The mules had been cut loose from the wagons before Steve arrived upon the scene. He had winged both bandits after stopping a slug, and supposed the affair over when Tony had thrown back the tarp covering the rear wagon and hailed him.

Escorting the girl to Nacozari wasn't too off from Steve's plans. He had some unfinished business in Sonora. He was on his way to Sonora to kill Amado Roybal just for the satisfaction it would give him. He knew that Amado Roybal often used Naco-

zari for a hangout. Maybe there was something providential in the girl's having crossed his trail.

"How did you happen to be on that mule train, Tony?" Steve asked, trying to keep his voice from showing too much inquisitiveness.

"I go to Nacozari," Tony answered simply. She began to sing.

"You wanted to go to Nacozari," Steve cut in, "so you just crawled under the tarp on a mule train?" He stopped the horse and looked at the silhouette of the girl in the darkness.

"*Si*, Esteban. When she move I sleep, when she sleep I eat!" Tony seemed to think the matter fully explained. She began to sing again.

"Are your father and mother in Nacozari, Tony?" Steve cut in once more, trying to sound as kind as his ruffled temper permitted.

"No, *señor*!" Tony was getting a little annoyed, too. "It ees my onkle in Nacozari. From thee fother and thee mother I run away."

"Oh. Your uncle is in Nacozari and you ran away from your home. Why, in the name of *Dios?*"

"Thee fother and mother wish I make marry with Pablo Duran. I do not loof heem. Poof!" Tony made a loud noise with her mouth. "He ees the fat one, *muy gordo*, with thee smell of thee goats."

They went on in silence for a while. A full moon rose and threw eerie shadows over the tangle of mesquite and cactus. Finally Tony broke the silence.

"If thee onkle gives what you call thee slap in the face, I will make marry with you, Esteban! Together we will steal the wet cows, no?" Tony's laugh rang out merrily.

"We will steal the wet cows, no!" Steve wasn't paying much attention to Tony's talk, now. Turn her over to her uncle, finish the delayed business and get back.

Morning brought them to the Sacramento Mountains. Another night's travel would bring them close to the last lap towards the Rio Grande.

IN AGUA PRIETA, just over the Border, Steve bought a horse and a new outfit of clothes with American money. They laid over in the Border town and began the last lap of the trip to Nacozari in the early morning. The desert heat was behind them. Daytime traveling was cool, compared to the intense heat of Southern Arizona. As Tony and Steve rode the dim wagon road towards their destination, Steve had never seen a girl look so utterly guileless and sweetly innocent. He noticed for the first time how beautiful she was. In Agua Prieta, in the house of friends, she had bathed, washed and ironed her dress, combed her hair, and there wasn't a trace of the desert trip visible. He began to feel a loneliness now, for the end of their strange trip would put her in the care of her uncle, and probably out of his life.

The village of Nacozari lay cuddled in the twin arms of the Sierra Madre Mountains which reached out to embrace it. It was a village in which charm mingled with an elegant courtesy, intrigue and frivolity. It had pomp and genteel poverty—the gay dress of the *caballeros* and the black shawls of the *señoras*; the language of medieval Spain in contrast to the lingo of the *peon*; the deep somnolence of siesta and of the sparkling and candid *fiesta*. Eastward rose the broad mesas, their flat surfaces covered with sunlight, colors running together, then spreading out in the deep viridian and rose of cliff and canyon.

Steve turned to Tony and found she had been watching him, still-eyed, her smile showing her teeth like a damp row of pearls. He thought, *I've brought you home, Tony, I'll never see you again!*

"Come," Tony said, urging her mount,

"we make call with *la Casa de Cabildo*, the house of civil authorities. My onkle he ees *officio*. After we will go to thee Casa de Cañon, thee home of thee onkle. But first thee *Cabildo*."

Steve had no great desire to visit the civil authorities in Nacozari. His mission to Sonora didn't fit in with registration. And now, with the village just below them, Tony informed him that her uncle was the official at the *Cabildo*. Things were getting complicated. He had come here to kill Amado Roybal and for that reason he didn't want to register his presence in Sonora. And, too, his feeling for Tony had grown to something that was not easy to forget.

For the past two days they had followed the wagon road between the Border and Nacozari. Mexicans, riding burros, had swung broad-brimmed sombreros in greeting; peon women, friendly and smiling, had watched them pass; and only that morning a detachment of soldiers riding grullas, had passed them and ridden on towards the village. There was no doubt in Steve's mind that Nacozari was well apprised of their coming. He also knew that the law required him to call at the *Cabildo* and account for his presence.

For Tony's sake, he gave up his mission in Sonora.

As they rode down the long slope into the valley, Steve recalled Tony's half-joking remark that she might not be welcomed by her uncle.

He said, "What if your uncle gives you the slap in the face?"

"If he gives the slap in the face, I will give heem the spit in the eye!" She turned to Steve with her teasing manner. "Then we go to the padre and make marry, no?" Then she pulled up her horse and began to cry. "You do not loof Tony, Esteban! You would make marry with gringo! *Caramba!*" Her eyes flooded with tears and she kicked her heels into the pony's ribs.

Steve kneed his grulla and caught up with her, laying his hand on hers. "Tony!" he said carefully. "I love you, will you marry me in Nacozari?"

"Esteban!" Her eyes were liquid. "Ees it from the heart you make talk?"

"From the heart, Tony." He pressed her hand against the saddle horn. "Sometimes they have 'dobe walls down here for gringos!"

"Poof!" Tony's mouth exploded the word. "The walls! For that I would tear out the eyes and hair of them. My onkle is *muy politico*. I am Antonia Consuela Ortez y Romero. It is they that would get thee backs to the wall! I will keel the dogs with my own hands."

"That," Steve answered with a grin, "I can believe."

Through an avenue of trees they came to the dirt street, winding like a burro trail to the plaza. The houses were adobe, flat-roofed and set behind walled. patios. The people gazed at them, showing surprise that an *anglo* was escorting a Spanish girl who rode astride like a man.

A SOLDIER in Federal uniform stopped them with clicked heels, slamming his rifle butt to the ground. He glanced at Tony in recognition, then let his eyes rest on Steve.

"Señor. Don Amado Roybal requests your presence."

A slug in the guts wouldn't have jolted Steve harder. The title, *"Don"* in front of Amado Roybal's name spelled a political upset in Nacozari! Not that political changes in the state of Sonora were unusual, but to find Amado Roybal, the man he had crossed the Border to kill, in a position of official capacity, was something he hadn't expected.

"Caramba!" Tony's voice showed her panic. Her eyes were wide with apprehension. "It ees thee *officio* we wish to make talk."

The soldier bowed. "His Excellency,

Don Amado is *muy officio señorita!*" He turned to Steve. "Allow me to escort you to His Excellency."

Steve shot a quick glance at Tony. She nodded her head despondently. The adobe wall Steve had joked about didn't seem too far away. His Excellency, Don Amado had made a slight request which was a command. He stepped from his horse and assisted Tony to alight. Fear and anxiety were in the grip with which her fingers closed about his arm.

Together they walked into the *Cabildo.*

Don Amado sat at a flat-topped desk. A bouquet of red roses sat at his elbow. He made a pretense of reading as the two entered, followed by the soldier who had accosted them. The escorting soldier stepped to the desk and saluted with a snappy movement of the arm. Don Amado raised his hand in a combined gesture of response and dismissal.

Steve made a quick appraisal of the *Cabildo.* Some two dozen soldiers in dress uniform stood at attention. A like number of officers sat at desks, busy with assorted papers. Every one seemed conscious of the girl's presence.

Don Amado, after a glance at Tony, let his eyes rest upon Steve. He looked through slitted lids, with malicious insolence.

Steve noted that he had grown heavier, a little older, but he retained the same bearing of domination and arrogance. His jowls were fuller, and under his chin a second fold of flesh swelled above his collar. Steve felt a wave of relief that the black, intense eyes held no recognition.

"Your business in Nacozari, *señor?*" There was nothing pleasant in His Excellency's smug grin.

"I am returning to *señorita* to her uncle, Excellency." Steve made a point of the formal bow that accompanied his statement. He had such a deep hatred for the man that satire showed in the gesture.

"The *señorita* will be conducted to the home of her uncle, *señor,*" Don Amado said curtly. His swarthy face was impassive, the bold eyes stared with the force of one who knows the trick of domination. "Your further business in Nacozari?"

"The mission of placing the *señorita* in the hands of her relative is my sole mission to your pleasant village, Excellency." Again Steve bowed from the hips in exaggerated formality.

"It is regrettable, *señor,* that we cannot dismiss you with thanks. There is a slight matter of a mule train being held up, the animals stolen, and two men from the state of Sonora being wounded!" Don Amado placed his elbows on the desk, tapping his finger tips together. His grin pulled his arrogant mouth to a twist. "In due time you will receive the commendation of the *Cabildo.* For the moment it will be necessary to detain you."

Steve felt his guts writhe in a knot. This was something he hadn't counted on. The mule train incident could be twisted to fit any consistency. Steve knew from the black, beaded eyes that the adobe wall had moved to the foreground. So close that tomorrow, at sunrise, it could become a reality.

Tony had been listening, her eyes riveted to the fat face of the *officio.* She came to the desk, her eyes blazing.

"What ees these mules train? For why you say that Esteban makes weeth mules?" She leaned against the desk, her face close to Don Amado. "It ees you that ees mule, pig, peon!"

His Excellency rose to his feet, his swarthy face crimson at the insult. He moved his hand in a gesture to one of the soldiers. Quickly Tony was taken by the arm. She whirled upon the soldier, slapping his face with a resounding whack.

"Dog!" She spat the word at him, then wheeled to the now grinning *officio.* "Where ees my onkle, thee Don Sebastian Romero?"

Don Amado's eyes had lit up with amusement, mixed with possessiveness. His

thoughts showed in the wet, insolent mouth, in the stare with which he took in her loveliness. Then his face assumed a more wooden fixity.

"The estimable Don Sebastian reposes in the village jail, *señorita!*" His eyes continued to move over her. He gloated over the fact that her uncle's plight had put her in his power. "I regret, *señorita,* that his arrest was made upon the grounds of treason!"

Tony moved toward him with deadly intent. Her eyes were afire with hatred and contempt. His Excellency clapped his hands together sharply. Two soldiers were beside her, taking her by each wrist. She struggled for an instant, then faced the *officio* defiantly. She stood with her head high, her eyes liquid pools of molten lava. Antonia Consuela Ortez y Romero had never looked more beautiful or more desirable.

Don Amado was drunk with her loveliness. He stood motionless before the girl's seething rage, unable to remove his eyes from her.

"Conduct the *señorita* to el Casa de Cañon, the home of her relative. Permit none to enter or leave the *casa,*" he finished, "except myself!"

CHAPTER TWO

A Drink in Nacozari

STEVE remained standing at the desk as Tony was escorted from the room. His Excellency's eyes followed the girl out the door and then turned to the American.

"The gringo mind, *señor,* is unable to appreciate the intricate temperament of the Latin. Tonight, the fair *señorita* will make love with me. Her love will even excel her hatred!"

Steve's fist exploded against the smirking mouth. He felt the thick lips split under his knuckles as the man staggered and fell. Then a rifle butt landed against his skull and he sank into utter darkness.

He awoke behind a barred door. He was lying on a narrow cot, facing a long corridor. The cell smelled unclean and his head was pounding. Getting to his feet he discovered the compartment overlooked the jail yard, and beyond that was the street. The window was barred, but was made two feet square, giving a wide view along the street.

In the yard a slovenly group of soldiers lounged, half dressed. Their uniforms and miserable pay saved them from being the lowest type of peons and thieves of the surrounding settlements from which they came. They were new recruits under Don Amado.

The displaced army was tranquilly reposing in the jail occupied by Steve. Four to five in each cell, they were enjoying the temporary relief from duty and the novelty of being jailed. They played guitars and sang endless songs in high tenor voices, stopping only long enough to drink the *vino* and eat the chili and beans supplied by the new government. When the confinement became tiresome, they would join up with the Don Amado faction.

The usurpation of the Nacozari Government by Don Amado had been accomplished by purely political means, all within the legal status of the existing regime. It had no smacking of revolution, hence the Federal uniforms had been retained.

The nefarious and stealthy practices by which Don Amado had changed the personnel of the administration could be understood only by the politically engrossed Latin.

Don Amado's political activities opened Steve's eyes to another side of the man's despicable character. A few years back he recalled Amado Roybal as a cruel, cold-blooded martinet in a Mexican revolutionary army.

Steve, acting as purchasing agent for a southwestern cattle company, had bought one thousand head of Mexican stock. Com-

pleting the transaction, he began moving the cattle towards the Border. He was arrested by a band of scouting rebels and taken to the tent of Amado Roybal, who was commanding the detachment. The entire herd had been confiscated for the revolution; Steve had been severely beaten under the direction of the guerrilla leader and made to take it on foot to the border. The incident had remained in Steve's mind as unfinished business in Sonora.

Now, behind prison bars, with Don Amado the *officio* of Nacozari, Steve realized that his chances of escape were slim. Amado Roybal was still playing the top cards in the game.

OUTSIDE, in mid-afternoon, the street began to take on the air of gay *fiesta*. It was a celebration to honor the conquest of His Excellency, and would last for days. From his cell Steve could see an old adobe church and a procession of people, their voices chanting, as they prepared to attend the service that began the *fiesta*. Along the flat roofs were strung *luminarios*, a homemade lantern of goatskin and candle. They would be lit after dark. Scraping music from violins and guitars drifted from open doors. *Caballeros* were riding up and down the streets, sweeping their sombreros to dark-eyed *señoritas*. They were officers from the *Cabildo*. Much *vino* was drunk, the bottles passing from hand to hand.

An old man, his skin dark against his gray mustache, came to Steve's cell. In his hands he carried a plate of beans and a *tortilla*. He was giving out the evening meal early, to join the celebration. He shoved the plate under the door, with a cup of coffee.

"It ees bad for you, *señor!*" He lifted his shoulders meaningly.

"When?" Steve asked, taking the plate. "Tomorrow at sunup?"

"No, *señor*. Eet will be after thee *fiesta*. For *fiesta* there ees no shoot. *Mucho tiempo, señor*, plenty time."

Steve ate, and drank the tepid, weak coffee. Finished, he again went to the window. Quite a throng had gathered. Soldiers, important in their new position of authority, began to shove the crowd back against the dirt sidewalks, clearing the street for the procession. Farther up the lane of trees there was singing and the strumming of guitars. Soon the procession came into view. Decked out in costume, their horses prancing against the tightened reins and the pressure of roweled spurs, some twenty *caballeros* rode two abreast.

Finally, the last of a long line, rode Don Amado. He sat a palomino stallion that reared to its hind feet in response to tightened reins. His Excellency was garbed in tight-fitting pants with bell bottoms. His hat was a broad, black sombrero with a silver band. By his side rode one who, by her place in the procession, would be queen of the *fiesta*. The skirts of her dress flowed over the rump of a black stallion moving with arched neck, feet dancing in a cloud of dust. Her white veil trailed from a tortoise shell comb rising from the mass of black hair. Her eyes were sparkling with animation as she waved to the crowds. Her left hand was held by Don Amado.

It was not until she was opposite the window that Steve saw, with a sickening sense of finality, that it was Tony. He didn't wait to see more of the procession. Going back to his bunk, he stretched out, letting the full import of his situation settle in his consciousness.

He was aroused from his lethargy by soldiers entering the corridor, dangling keys from their hands and talking in falsetto voice. They had been drinking much *vino*. Their ribald comments mingled with the voices of the prisoners. They moved from door to door, freeing the inmates. The former soldiers of the *Cabildo* were being released to participate in the gaiety. After a few days they would be back in the army under the command of Don Amado.

One other than Steve remained confined. It was Don Sebastian Romero. The old man sat on his bunk, dejected. His head rested in his hands and his frame was stooped with the weight of defeat. His cell was several doors away from the one occupied by Steve, and the American had to flatten his face against the bars of his cell to see him.

Steve couldn't bring himself to be much concerned for the old man—not after the progress Tony had made with Don Amado! It was pretty apparent to Steve that Don Sebastian, through Tony's influence, wouldn't be executed.

Politics in Nacozari were too deep for Steve. Right now he cursed himself for being a damned fool. The delivery of Tony to her home in Nacozari was an incident that should have had no bearing on the purpose that had brought him to Nacozari. His love for Tony had influenced him, against his better judgment, to present himself at the *Cabildo*. His feeling for the beautiful girl had in reality wiped out his desire to kill Amado Roybal. He had wanted to marry her, and take her back to the little cow spread he had started in New Mexico.

He tried not to blame Tony for her alliance with the new order in government. Like himself, she was a victim of circumstances. Once she had gotten over her sudden anger, she realized she was in the hands of Don Amado. The *officio* wanted her—her uncle's fate rested in her hands. To refuse His Excellency would bring swift death to an old man whose political sun had set, and would in no way defend her in the future.

To Steve his own end was plain. In the mind of the nefarious Don Amado, he was a rival for the love of Tony. He had come to Nacozari at a time when political strife was at a white heat. And above all, he had no reprieve from his impetuous act of driving his fist against the insolent mouth of the *officio*.

After the *fiesta* was over there would come an adobe wall, before which he would dig his own grave. After that a volley of rifle fire and Steve Douglas, *el gringo*, would be forgotten.

THE fiesta had gone well into the third day and showed signs of dying from its own exuberance. The effects of wine and a sated gaiety showed in the faces of the soldiers as they began to pick up the loose ends of duty.

Steve had paced his cell until he had a deep path worn into the dirt floor. His eyes were sunk deep in his head and a stubble of brown beard shadowed his face.

Accompanied by two soldiers, Don Amado entered the corridor of the jail. He was drunk, his eyes red, the lids puffy. Steve noticed with satisfaction that Don Amado's mouth was still swollen from the deep lacerations his knuckles had carved. He was followed by Tony. As she entered she placed her hand on his arm.

Her eyes darted to Steve's cell. The eyes of the *officio* took in the glance with jealous apprehension. He smirked with satisfaction as Tony's eyes held no regard for the American. She turned her face to His Excellency and her smile for him glowed with animation. She was fresh and strikingly beautiful. Steve wished that he could have held her eye for an instant; let her know that it was all right, that he didn't blame her.

The soldiers unlocked the cell of Don Sebastian Romero. They escorted him to where Tony stood with the man who had defeated him. He remained before them without speaking. Don Amado surveyed him with contempt.

"At the request of your niece, *señor*, you have been permitted to return to your *casa*. Your *casa* has been declared a prison, and you will be under guard until the *señorita* and myself have been formally united in marriage!"

"Excellency!" Don Sebastian bowed

from his waist. There was grace and an old-world dignity in the gesture. All of this was lost on the cultureless *politico*.

"There ees more, Excellency!" Tony again placed her hand on the arm of the *officio*. Her glance prompted him to further declamation.

Don Amado cleared his throat. "It is not the intention of the administration, *señor*, to inflict punishment upon those who are related by marriage to members of the *Cabildo*. The charge of treason against you will be dropped—" he amended hastily—"after the ceremony."

Again Don Sebastian bowed. He looked at neither Tony nor Don Amado. With diginity he walked from the jail, the two soldiers at his side.

"Come! Thees calls for *vino*, no?" Tony's fingers gripped the arm of the *officio*. "Better, let us drink thee tequila!"

Don Amado, already well in his cups, favored tequila. He also desired to place his arms about the girl, but Tony pressed her hands against his chest, her head back, smiling.

"The loof and thee keeses is for marry!" She turned to a soldier at the door. "Fernando, bring thee tequila, *pronto!*"

The soldier soon returned with a bottle of tequila and glasses on a tray. Tony filled the glasses with the fiery liquor. She barely touched her own lips to her glass as Don Amado drank down the raw cactus whiskey.

Don Amado looked at his empty glass, then let his eyes rest with a glint of suspicion upon the smiling face of the girl. He wanted to make sure the desirable Antonia had no feeling of attachment for the American. The fact that she had spent nights and days with him in the desert alone, rankled his cantankerous soul. The slug of tequila fanned his jealousy. He waved his empty glass towards Steve's cell.

"Do you also wish the release of the gringo, my dear?" His mouth twisted in a grin, but his eyes were beady.

"Release? *Caramba!* I wish heem to be keeled, weeth hees back to thee wall!" Tony tossed her head in the gesture that Steve had come to love.

Don Amado threw his own head back and laughed. He walked to Steve's cell, his face gloating.

"You will recall, gringo—" he used the slurring term with all its implications—"that I mentioned the fact that the Latin mind could not be understood by the stupid *anglo.*" The tequila was seeping through his brain. He put his hands upon the bars of Steve's cell. "Tomorrow, it will afford me much pleasure to have you shot."

"Tomorrow, greaser," Steve answered calmly, "you can go to hell!"

"Tomorrow, I will execute you with my own hand! I will not kill you quickly, my friend. I will use six loaded rifles; five of them will cause you to suffer much—very much. I shall dispatch you to hell with the sixth rifle, my friend, after I have wearied of your cries!"

He turned to the soldier who stood open-mouthed, listening.

"Place special guard on this gringo! Give him neither food nor water. Tomorrow at sunup I will have him conducted to the wall!"

"But no, Excellency." Tony had come forward to the cell door. "If he sees how we live tonight, dying tomorrow will geeve him added torture—"

Don Amado was pleased with her acute sensibilities. No doubt remained in his mind that the *señorita* was enamored of him. She favored him with her smiles and for the American she held only scorn. He made her a low bow.

"Have you a suggestion for his disposition, my love?"

"Let him be our guest—yours and mine—at thee *casa* weeth thee onkle!" Her smile for Don Amado was ravishing. "With guards, of course."

His Excellency clapped his hands sharply. The two soldiers that had escorted Don

Sebastian appeared. His Excellency explained the situation in crisp tones. Steve was escorted out, a soldier on each side, another holding a rifle to his back. As he passed through the door, he heard Tony's voice, raised enough for him to hear, and his heart beat with happiness.

"Come!" Tony was saying. "Let us drink more of the tequila!"

WHEN Steve arrived at the Casa de Cañon, he found Don Sebastian sitting in a spacious living room replete with old world furnishings. Huge chandeliers hung from the high ceiling. Full-length mirrors with ornate frames decorated the walls, and between them hung paintings of old Spanish masters. It was a home of elegance that drew its charm from an age and time that was passing. *It's like Tony,* Steve thought. *Like her when she tosses her head. . . .*

Don Sebastian rose from a massive chair in greeting.

"Welcome, my friend."

The soldiers stood at the door, grinning. After greeting Steve the old man put a hand on each of their shoulders. The gesture seemed to convey a message. They backed out, nodding, still grinning.

When they were alone in the room, Don Sebastian led Steve to a window opening on the rear grounds of the house. In a clump of trees, three ox-carts had been drawn up. The oxen were feeding on the embankment of a stream that wound through the village. The old man explained to Steve that the carts had been placed there by freighters from Agua-Prieta. That the men were now mixing with the soldiers in the plaza. There was a cunning look in the old eyes, and he didn't seemed as dejected as his demeanor in the Nacozari jail implied.

Steve felt a strange chill crawl along his spine that made the short hairs on his neck stiffen. He saw the white mustache of Don Sebastian stretch across the handsome old face with his smile. Steve felt his own lips pull apart in a grin. He sensed action in the offing, and felt like throwing his arms around the venerable old *politico.* Instead, he bowed.

"Rifles, powder and bullets, Excellency? If your men had not deserted you—" Steve's eyes held the steady gaze of the older man unflinchingly.

Don Sebastian's eyes moved from Steve's face to the oxcarts. With the back of his hand he brushed his mustache.

"The consignment of arms and ammunition were directed to reach the army of Don Amado from the Sonora Government. The delivery has been detained out of respect to the celebration. Throughout history, *señor,* men seldom have deserted the cause of common good. Perhaps we can effect delivery tomorrow." Again Don Sebastian's smile lit up the keen eyes.

The old aristocrat's words were full of meaning—underneath them lay the bold hint of revolt. Three oxcarts, their wooden wheels sinking in the sand, became a symbol of conspiracy. A feeling of elation filled Steve. He longed for the feel of a rifle in his hands.

"The grapes of Nacozari, my friend, excel in brandy. Shall we drink to success?" Don Sebastian signaled a servant as he spoke.

The two men stood, their glasses lifted.

"To the house of the Romeros," Steve offered, his goblet of brandy catching the light of the window, its bouquet filling the room.

CHAPTER THREE

No Quarter

THE large south window of the *casa* overlooked the road leading to the *Cabildo.* Two guards, their rifles slung to their shoulders, paced back and forth along the front of the *casa* grounds. As one of the guards moved in line with the window, he turned his head slightly. Don Sebastian

raised his hand. The soldier made no acknowledgment of the sign, but continued his patrol beyond the front to the oxcarts. With his gun butt he roused the sleeping sentinel. The two talked for a few minutes. When the soldier returned to his beat he shifted his rifle and slung it to the opposite shoulder.

Shadows lengthened in the canyons and the sky became red as the sun lowered. The trees along the street towards the plaza formed an arch with their tops meeting, and the road resembled a tunnel through which the darkness crept, cutting the *casa* off from the main part of the village. On the west side of the road, which only took on the semblance of a street as it neared the plaza, lay the adobe wall utilized for the execution of those who ran afoul of the law. Just behind the wall sat a jail, smaller than the one in the area of the *Cabildo,* for the retention of those upon whom the sentence of death had been pronounced. From this jail there was no appeal.

An hour later, Steve with Don Sebastian close beside him, moved towards the oxcarts under the cover of almost black darkness. When they arrived the sentinel was yoking the oxen to the wooden tongues of the carts. Their escape from the *casa* had been effected by the guard, one Carlos Morano, who had exchanged signals with Don Sebastian earlier in the evening.

The carts were pulled to the slope facing the wall where tomorrow's executions would take place. Steve was assigned the distribution of arms. No sound except the creaking of wheels attended the movement of the munitions.

Two figures appeared through the darkness. They were Carlos Morano and Manuel Baca, a colonel, who had been stripped of his rank by Don Amado. Baca was in the uniform of a sergeant. He stepped to where Don Sebastian stood.

"Excellency!" The sergeant bowed.

"Let us make an end to this farce in government, Colonel!" Don Sebastian said. By his words he returned the sergeant to his former rank.

"Gladly, Excellency. And at once!"

The old don stood erect, his white head standing out in the darkness. "Let us begin by capturing the guards over the prisoners. Lock them in their own cells. Release the prisoners, arm them, and apprise them of their duties."

A flash of white teeth cut across the blob of shadow that was the face of Colonel Manuel Baca.

THE prison guards were drinking wine in the room facing the corridor. They sat at a table, their rifles stacked in the middle of the floor.

Jose Apodaca, corporal of the guard, stood with blanched face, his eyes wide with fear. A rifle barrel in the hands of Carlos Morano was pushed against his stomach. Three other guards, stupid with wine and surprise, elevated their hands as Steve and Baca covered them with their guns. They were locked in a single cell.

Steve, a rifle slung over his shoulder, began to free the prisoners. The condemned men, realizing they were free, became willing recruits. The prisoners, numbering twenty-two, were armed from the supply of munitions. Placed under Carlos Morano they were stationed in strategic points along the brush-covered ridge overlooking the village. As the night progressed, a steady stream of recruits found their way to the oxcarts which appropriately enough had become the headquarters of Don Sebastian's revolt. By the first streak of day, Steve had only four rifles left from the supply. By actual count two hundred and thirty men were strung out along the line that commanded the street.

By sunup only soldiers in uniform could be found, for the news of the revolt had spread rapidly. The civilian populace remained in their homes, their doors locked. In front of the *Cabildo,* officers were making frantic efforts to whip the defending

army into something like military order. The haste, apparent in the action of the depleted array of men, showed their panic. Two officers rode to the Casa de Cañon to verify the escape of Don Sebastian and the *gringo*. They wore captain's insignia. Steve and Don Sebastian were standing by the oxcarts. Through the branches of scrub cedar they watched the two men ride around the *casa*, then wheel their horses to return.

Steve turned his eyes to Don Sebastian, then to Colonel Baca. The colonel had a rifle in his hands.

"The hostilities," Don Sebastian said courteously, "may as well begin!"

The colonel threw his rifle to his shoulder. With a quick aim he squeezed the trigger. One of the officers lurched from his saddle and fell to the ground.

"Good shooting, Colonel," Steve grinned, picking up his own weapon.

The other horseman sank his spurs into the side of his mount and, leaning close to his horse's neck, made a run for the plaza.

An instant before Steve's shot bounced in echo from the walls of the *Cabildo*, the rider rolled in the dirt of the street.

The two rifle shots spanked the group of Don Amado's soldiers into a sudden burst of energy. A volley of fire tore into the side of the hill. An answering volley ripped into the scattered men about the plaza, and Steve estimated over a dozen fell. Acrid smoke from the black powder gave off the pungent smell of battle. Don Sebastian's men were shooting at will and before the soldiers of the *Cabildo* could gain the shelter of the buildings along the street, another twenty-five to thirty men fell. They were a perfect target for the men hidden in the clumps of brush. Don Amado's men were well concealed among the houses. Firing ceased.

Thin wafts of smoke drifted through the air, mixed with the blanket of dust that rose from the feet of the running men and the hoofs of the two riderless horses.

A white rag, attached to a rifle barrel, rose above the roof of one of the buildings.

"Hold fire!" Don Sebastian commanded, and the order went along the line of hidden men.

An officer of the *Cabildo*, carrying a flag of truce, moved up the slope of the hill. His eyes cut a swift glance at the oxcarts and his mouth fell open. He swallowed audibly. He made an effort to regain composure.

"The terms of your surrender, *señor?*" he asked of Don Sebastian.

"The terms of *your* surrender, *señor,*" Don Sebastian replied, "are unconditional. Otherwise we shall renew the attack!"

The don made it clear that the discussion was ended. The officer returned to confer with his fellows.

Steve cleaned and loaded the four extra rifles as well as his own piece, measuring the powder, placing the greased patch of buckskin over the muzzle, the spherical bullet over that, and thrusting it home with a ramrod. He set the priming and flint with care. The oxcart still contained a full cargo of powder and bullets not yet drawn upon. Refilling his powder horn he set the loaded rifles against a tree.

Following the *Cabildo* officer's return to his troop, men, women and children began to evacuate the houses. They carried food, clothing and bedding. Used to upsets in government, they bore their lot stoically.

The arena was cleared of noncombatants; the white flag was lowered. Don Amado's troop was inviting a siege.

Between the brush-covered hillside and the row of adobe houses lay a stretch of open terrain. To attempt to cross it would be foolhardy. Don Sebastian consulted with Steve and Colonel Baca.

"Excellency," Steve addressed Don Sebastian, "if we could gain the rear of the *Cabildo*, the enemy would be caught in cross-fire. Permit me to take a detachment of fifty men, circle the village, and come upon them from the east. I would like a personal interview with Don Amado!"

Don Sebastian brushed the back of his hand across his mustache in his characteristic manner.

"Success, *amigo!*" he said.

TEN minutes later Steve led a detachment of fifty men, each with a hundred rounds of ammunition, around the north end of the village. To cover the maneuver a steady stream of fire peppered the buildings.

It took Steve and his detachment over an hour to reach a point commanding the position of the entrenched troop. Steve figured, with his advantage the fight would be over in short order. He gave the command to fire.

The unexpected volley from their rear was devastating. Those who had not fallen from the fire were caught in the throes of reorganizing. While his men were reloading, Steve saw Don Sebastian's men cover the terrain of open space and gain the shelter of the buildings. The street held both dead and wounded. Covered from both sides, and facing a hand-to-hand conflict, some of Don Amado's men threw their rifles to the ground in surrender.

Steve made a run for the rear of the *Cabildo*. In the rear patio, he found Don Amado's palomino stallion. The animal was covered with lather and his sides gashed from cruel spurring. He found Don Amado at the front of the building, studying Don Sebastian's attack, watching his empire slip from his hands. Steve's rifle was swung and cocked.

"Turn around, greaser."

Don Amado whirled. There was something fiendish, maniacal, in the cold cruelty that shone from his eyes—the malevolence of a tyrant who had been thwarted in a political dream of power was in every line of his face.

"Drop your pistol to the floor."

With a twist of his mouth, Don Amado let the weapon fall.

Steve walked towards him and kicked the pistol to the wall. He asked, "What have you done with her?"

Don Amado regained something of his poise. He was a gambler and he took a gambler's chance.

"I suspect, *señor,* that as long as the *señorita* is in my hands, you will do as I wish!"

"Your wishes?"

"I knew I could count on your reasonableness," Don Amado answered with sar-

A BULLET FOR THE HANGTRAIL KID

By C. William Harrison

Lawmen were all alike in the Kid's book—honest as sin and poor as preachers, with more brains in their badges than in their heads—and guts only for the Wild Bunch to shoot at!

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casm. "I take it you are in love with the *señorita?*"

"You may take it that way."

"I am fortunate. I have no great desire for martyrdom, and your infatuation offers me a means of escape."

"I'm listening," Steve answered. "Lay out your hand."

"We will ride out of Nacozari together, by way of the canyon. After I have reached a point of suitable safety, I will reveal the whereabouts of the *señorita.* That, *amigo,* is my hand!"

"First," Steve answered, "you will reveal her whereabouts. Should I find her unharmed, I will offer no resistance to your escape."

"I am dictating the terms, *señor."*

"I am certain, my one time friend, that I offer the terms." His eyes clashed and held the stare of the other. "My first mission to Sonora, *señor,* was to kill one Señor Amado. This killing would not be frowned upon by the government of Mexico, since it involves an unsuccessful revolution instituted a few years ago—by this same Señor Amado. We worked together then—recall to your mind the stealing, by appropriation, of one thousand head of live stock earmarked for the Southwestern Cattle Company. I was fortunate you did not recognize me earlier!"

Steve made an elaborate bow.

Don Amado stiffened with the memory and the sand ran out of him. His eyes glazed with fear.

"The *señorita* is unharmed." Terror wiped out all traces of the insolence that characterized him. He slobbered the words.

"There is nothing," Steve said, "quite as despicable as a scared gambler. Shall we proceed?"

Steve followed the craven figure to the back door. Outside he mounted the palomino.

"The horse," he said, "will be appropiated as part payment on one thousand head of cattle, *señor.* Start walking!"

Steve followed. They went down an alley to a back street, crossed a stream and came to open terrain. The palomino gave them safe-conduct from Don Sebastian's fire. Crossing the stream, they entered a dense growth of scrub timber.

It was over a mile from the *Cabildo.* In the center of the timbered tract stood an old stone house. It was an old, abandoned munition dump. A hasp, secured outside by a harness snap, held the door.

Steve's eyes blazed as he unfastened the snap and jerked the hasp from the staple. He kicked the door inward.

Tony stood inside, her hands gripping an iron rod. She drew it back with full intentions of deadly assault. When she saw Steve she dropped it and ran to him.

"You all right, Tony?" Steve's arms went around her as she clung to him.

"Si, Esteban. Tony ees *bueno."* Then her eyes lit on the protuberant form of the man whose downfall she had planned and effected. They lit up with amusement.

"It ees thee *peon,* no? How you like heem, greaser? You like to make thee loof to Tony, no? *Caramba!"* She leaned back in Steve's arms and surveyed the swollen mouth and pig eyes with enjoyment, making the unconscious gesture of tossing her head.

"What happened, Tony?" Steve pulled her to him.

"When thees pig, thees *peon* find I make heem damn fool, he has thee soldiers throw Tony in thees clink!" She looked at the rock house with contempt. "I will keel thee dogs!"

Steve looked at the cowed fat man.

"Get moving," Steve ordered. "Make it fast before I change my mind!"

Amado Roybal headed for the canyon.

"Esteban, you loof Tony, and not mad with her?"

"I love you, Tony, all of it!"

"We will make marry, no?"

"We will make marry, yes."

"Then kees Tony!" ● ● ●

By
GORDON
D.
SHIRREFFS

Yellow light filled the pit, but Dick was well back in the darkness. "Can you see him, Ed?"

TIME TO KILL

●

It was no longer just another man-hunt for Dick Gallery—for alone in the murderous blackness of the abandoned mine he found something he'd never thought to track—a man's last courage!

DICK GALLERY got off the train at High Peaks and took his saddle and rifle from the baggage car. The sun was setting, painting the sky rose and gold. High Peaks sprawled along Thief Creek, the weathered false-fronted buildings taking on a soft tone from the sunset. Far to the south were the purple mountains of Mexico.

For a moment he stood and watched the train chuff up the long grade to the west. High Peaks was the end of a long trail.

He had tracked Sam Merritt from Deming, lost him at Wilcox, spent a week searching until a miner in Benson had told he had seen a man answering Sam's description getting on a stage for High Peaks.

He had been on the trail for two months, starting in El Paso. He had spent eight hundred dollars of the Merritt family's money tracing Sam. But Sam looked like hundreds of middle-aged ranchers—he had no distinguishing marks. He had simply vanished with five thousand dollars in his wallet, looking for a ranch that would suit his fancy. From what his family had said the missing man has been happy enough. He had no known enemies.

Somewhere among the deserts or somber mountains of the High Peaks country might lie the answer, but Dick had lost faith. High Peaks would be the end of his quest.

He took a room at the Bradshaw House and ate at a nearby restaurant. Then he began his usual procedure, carrying the worn picture of Sam Merritt into each saloon, gambling hall and restaurant, patiently asking anyone who would listen if they had seen Sam. It was almost midnight when he reached the last place on Tedrue Street, a rambling saloon bearing the imposing name: The Glory Of The West. It was the usual dive. Men played cards at the tables. The roulette wheel whirled constantly. Drunken men swayed upstairs leaning on the arms of painted, hard-faced women. The bar was lined with miners and cowpokes mixed with a few soldiers from nearby Fort Huachuca. Dick called for a beer and showed the picture to the barkeep. The man glanced at it and then looked quickly at Dick.

"Yeh. I seen a man like him in here about ten days ago. Flashed a big roll. A little drunk he was and I mind tellin' him to keep his wallet in his pocket. I've seen men killed for a lot less than he had."

Dick leaned forward. "Have you any idea where he went?"

The barkeep slid Dick's glass toward him. "Listen, mister, I got more to do than worry about where my customers go when they leave here."

Dick placed a bill on the bar. "Think! Did he say anything about where he was going?"

The barkeep shook his head.

A man next to Dick tapped his shoulder. "I saw that man. Had a few drinks with him one night. He asked me if I knew of a ranch for sale. He liked this country. I said there were some nice little spreads up toward the headwaters of Thief Creek. That's all I remember."

The barkeep shoved the bill toward the man. "It's yours—you earned it."

Dick bought the man a drink. "Do you know if he went up there?"

The man shrugged. "I hung a good one on that night. Plumb forgot that jasper until I heard you talkin' about him."

Dick left the saloon and headed for his hotel. He had hired a horse. Maybe he should wait until daylight but there was an itch in him to find Merritt. The hunt had taken on more than the aspect of a job—it was a challenge to his skill. Five years with the Texas Rangers had developed that skill. A year of lone wolf trouble-shooting had shown him his future line of work. He went up to his room and got his saddle and rifle. He told the desk clerk to hold the room.

It was dark outside the hotel. Dick walked cautiously back to the stable. He hung his saddle on a post and felt for matches. Something rustled inside the stable. He listened and then grinned. Mice. He lit a match and went in. The dun was in a stall at the back of the stable. He went back, cursing as the match seared his fingers. He felt in his vest pocket for another.

Something moved behind him. He whirled. Against the dim outline of the door he saw a man.

A fist smashed against his mouth. He staggered back and hit a post. Two more

blows thudded against his jaw. He turned sideways and brought up a left and followed with a short right. His assailant cursed and went down on one knee. Dick kicked out. His boot connected.

His leg was pulled out from under him, and he hit the floor. A threshing, pummeling weight crashed down on him. Dick got his arm around a neck and hung on. His free hand touched a gun. It clicked as the man cocked it. Dick gripped his attacker's wrist and wrenched the gun away. It went off, blinding him. A boot hit his head. He sprawled. Feet thudded against the ground.

The man appeared for a moment, outlined against the door A moment later he heard the drumming of hoofs on the hard earth of the alleyway.

Dick got up and felt for the lamp. He lit it and wiped the blood from his face. He examined the pistol. It was a Colt .44, walnut grips, six inch barrel, no different from a thousand other guns in Arizona. He shrugged and slid it in his waistband.

He led the dun from its stall. Something turned under his left foot. He stooped. An object shone dully in the yellow lamplight. He picked it up. It was a spur, with chap guard and the almost outmoded tie-down, the strap torn in half. Dick placed it in his jacket pocket. It might have been lost by anyone.

THE eastern sky was graying with false dawn when he halted the dun in a shallow valley, high on the southern flank of the range of mountains behind High Peaks. He had reached the headwaters of the creek an hour before. It was a lonely, windy place.

He made a fire, sat down and was waiting for his coffee when his dun nickered. He stood up and placed his hand on his Colt. A man was sitting a claybank just within a clump of scrub oaks. He touched the claybank with his spurs and rode forward.

"Howdy," he called. "Smelled that good coffee. You got any to spare?"

"Set," said Dick.

The man swung from the saddle. "Mack Tyler," he said. "From down to Bisbee."

"Dick Gallery."

Tyler sat down and stretched. "Been riding most of the night," he said. "Forgot to take any grub. Figured I'd find a ranch somewheres. This is damned lonely country."

Dick filled his cup and passed it to Tyler. Tyler shook his head. "Hell, I got a cup of my own, *amigo*. Forgot to bring it."

Tyler got up and went to his horse. His outfit was fairly new. Good boots and saddle. The Winchester had an unmarked stock, unusual in that rough country. Anyway he was wearing two spurs.

Tyler turned. "You riding for the Border?"

"No. Looking around for a spread to buy, if the price is right."

Tyler nodded. "I just sold my place." He grinned. "That's why I look like a dude with these fancy duds. Feel a little outstanding."

Dick smiled. "Seem to be a lot of men buying and selling around here."

Tyler looked at him quickly. "Anything wrong with that?"

"No. Can't understand why a man would want to leave this country."

Tyler refilled his cup. "Different reasons, I guess. Itchy feet mostly. Hell, I had a good place. Just wanted to get on and look around. Always wanted to see Sonora."

"If you're packing money you'd better watch your step. They've got hombres down there, Mexes and Americans both, who'd kill you for that tin cup you're drinking out of."

Tyler got up. "I didn't say I was packin' any money, *amigo*. Thanks for the coffee—and the advice. You're not ridin' south then?"

Dick shook his head. Tyler swung up

on his horse and rode down the slope. He turned and waved back.

Dick scratched his chin. Maybe—maybe not. Tyler looked all right. The new outfit did stand out. Maybe he had sold his spread and maybe Sam Merritt's bankroll had paid for the outfit. Dick waited until Tyler was out of sight and then followed him. The trail led down winding slopes and through groves of scrub oak. A jay chattered from a tree. The sun began to warm Dick's back.

By noon Dick had lost Tyler's trail completely. He cast back and forth across a wide shoulder of the mountain. To the west spread desert country, mottled with swiftly moving patches of cloud shadow. The mountains of Mexico loomed purple and mysterious, with crowns of puffy white clouds. It was a lonely quiet land.

There was no trace of dust on the desert to the south and he shrugged, led the dun to the west, quartering back and forth. Late in the afternoon he had reached a huge shoulder of the mountain that thrust itself out to the south. It was as good a place to camp as any.

He swung from his horse and then placed his hand on his rifle. A man was riding toward him. A man wearing a faded set of levis and a battered black hat.

The man held up his hand. "Howdy," he said. "You figgerin' on campin' here, friend?"

"I was."

"Ain't no need of that. My brother and I have our place not more than a mile from here. You're welcome to spend the night."

"Much obliged."

"Not at all. I'm Joe Pettis."

Dick smiled. "Dick Gallery. I'm headin' for Sonora."

"You've a long, hot ride ahead of you tomorrow. Meanwhile you can take it easy at our place." Joe's weather-beaten face broke into a smile. "Ed—he's my brother—and myself don't see much company. Sometimes for months at a time. We like to get the news."

Dick rode alongside the rancher. "Did you happen to meet a man by the name of Matt Tyler?" he asked.

"No. He come this way lately?"

"Today."

"Ain't seen anyone for over a month. Friend of yours?"

"Yes. We were planning to go to Sonora together."

Pettis pointed ahead. "There's the place. It ain't much but we call it home."

A WEATHER-BEATEN log house stood in a fold of the huge canyon that cut deep into the flank of the mountain. A steer bawled from a corral. Smoke drifted from the chimney of the house. Ed Pettis was a counterpart of his brother, except that he looked a little older. The house was crudely furnished but comfortable. A huge fireplace, blackened by many fires, filled one end of the living room. The three of them ate by candlelight. The two men seemed pathetically anxious to talk to someone. Dick told them of the news.

Ed leaned back in his chair and stuffed his pipe. "Where are you from, Gallery?"

"Originally Albuquerque. I've been looking over your country for a spread."

"Plenty of them here for sale, providin' you got the right price."

"Oh, if a man ain't too fussy he can get a place for little enough," said Joe.

Dick looked at the fire. "I'll pay a good price for the right place. Did well this last year. I aim to get a place and build it up."

Ed lit his pipe and bent his head to look over the flare of the match. "You don't want to tote too much cash around here, Gallery. We ain't so far from the Border here. A man could lose his money, horse and gear—even his life, and his body would never be found."

Joe nodded. "That's right. Just you be careful."

Hours later Dick lay in bed, staring at

the ceiling, with his hands locked behind his head. The wind soughed through the trees behind the house. The disappearance of Tyler had him puzzled. Unless he had hidden to let Dick ride past and then had either followed him or gone on his way, avoiding everyone. There had been something about the man that had aroused suspicion. A certain furtiveness. It was a slim chance, but Tyler might have been involved in Merritt's disappearance.

Later, Dick rolled over in his sleep and suddenly opened his eyes. Something had bulked darkly against the window as he turned. Dick placed his hand on his Colt. The wind was still blowing. A loose window pane rattled somewhere in the house. He got out of bed and went to the window, poking the drab half curtain aside with the barrel of his pistol. He saw no one. He went to the door and listened. The house was quiet except for the tapping of the loose pane and the moaning of the wind in the chimney.

He opened the door quietly. On an impulse he pulled on his clothes and left the room. He padded through the living room to the kitchen door and across the kitchen to the back door. He bumped against a shelf and instinctively put up his hand to keep anything from falling. His hand touched something. A spur. He felt over it quickly. It was like the spur he had found in the stable the night of the fight.

He slipped it into his pocket and then felt along the shelf. It was the only one.

He opened the back door and walked softly out into the darkness. The barn was two hundred yards from the house. He went to it and entered. He closed the door behind him and then took out the spurs. He lit a match. The spurs were identical. When the match went out he stood there in the darkness, a slow wave of uneasiness sweeping over him.

Something grated against the hard earth not far from the barn. He walked slowly to the back of the barn, with a hand out in front of him to warn of obstructions. He climbed out of a window at the rear of the barn and crouched in the deep shadow. The front door grated back on its hinges.

For long moments he hardly dared to breathe, as slow footsteps sounded in the barn. Then he walked softly back through the trees behind the barn. He had seen an outbuilding close against the base of the steep slopes above the ranch. Beyond it the dark mouth of a mine gaped. He reached the outbuilding, went in, shut the door and listened. Then he walked slowly forward. His right foot hit something yielding. He stooped. His hand touched the cold face of a man.

Dick lit a match. Matt Tyler lay before him, his face set in the blue pallor of death. His gear lay against a back wall. His trousers had been ripped apart at the waist and his shirt lay back.

"Money belt," he breathed softly.

He rolled the body over. A dark patch showed against the new jacket.

An owl hooted from the timber close to the outbuilding. He went to the door and sidled around to the back of the building. He looked down at the house. There was no sign of life. He climbed the short slope to the mine and went in. Something thudded against the back of his skull and he fell forward, his face smashing against the hard earth. Then he knew nothing.

WATER splashed against his face. A hand shook him gently. Dick opened his eyes. Yellow candle light showed the faintly familiar face of a man bending anxiously over him.

"You all right now?" the man asked.

"Yeh—I know you, I think."

"You got an awful wallop."

Dick nodded and touched the back of his head tenderly. Blood had matted the hair. He looked about. He was in a room, squared out of the side of the mine. A cot stood at one side, covered with rumpled blankets. A rude table and chair stood back

against the wall. The candle guttered in the draft, alternately plunging corners of the room into shadow and flooding others with light.

The man rubbed his thin face. "You know me, you say? I can't say as I've ever seen you before."

Dick took the picture of Sam Merritt from his pocket. "That you?"

"Why, yes! Where did you get it?"

"From your family. I've been trailing you for two months. What in hell's name is going on here?"

Merritt closed his eyes and then opened them wearily. He was thin and pale.

"I've been a prisoner here for days."

"I don't get it."

Merritt jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "They must have figured you were looking for me."

"They?"

"The Pettis brothers. Ed scuppered you and brought you in here."

"What is this all about?"

"I came into High Peaks about twelve days ago. Got a little drunk and made the mistake of showing my roll. Joe Pettis offered to show me this place. They got the drop on me and put me in here. They've been trying to force me to write a letter to my people, asking for ten thousand dollars ransom. I wouldn't do it. They been cutting down on my food for five days now."

Dick got up. "What a damned fool I am! I was so damned sure Tyler was my man."

"Who's Tyler?"

"A man I met yesterday. Acted a little skittish. Well-heeled and heading for Sonora. I trailed him and lost him. Then I ran into Joe Pettis. He offered to let me bunk here. I was nosing around and found Tyler's body in the outbuilding near the mine entrance. No wonder I lost track of him."

Merritt nodded. "They got his money and took care of him. They only let me live because they figured I'd eventually agree to write that letter. One of them must have seen you in town and figured out who you were."

"Someone jumped me in a stable in town the night I rode out here. I didn't get a look at him but he dropped this spur." Dick took it from his pocket. "I found its mate in the kitchen of the house. Evidently they were planning either to do away with me or let me walk into a trap. Well, I did."

Merritt walked to the door and looked up the tunnel. "It's getting light."

"Is one of them on guard out there?"

"No. Come here. I'll show you why."

Dick went to the doorway. Against the grayness of the mine entrance he saw a grillwork blocking the tunnel. Merritt looked at him. "They come in a couple of times a day and try to force me to write that letter. Usually right after breakfast and in the afternoon. They'll be in soon enough. The only reason you ain't lying beside Tyler is because I promised to write the letter if they let you live."

"Sam, if they get that letter and the money, I don't think either of us will ever get out of here to do anything about it."

Merritt nodded gloomily. "I know. I try to think they'll keep their word but I know they won't."

Dick looked back into the tunnel. "Have you tried that way?"

Merritt nodded. "It's no use. There's a place a couple of hundred yards up there where the floor has caved in. I dropped some stones in the hole. It's a helluva way to the bottom and no way of getting past."

Dick turned and picked up a candle from a shelf. "I'll be damned if I'm going to sit here and wait for those two buzzards to come in and cold-deck me."

Merritt gripped Dick's arm. "Don't try it, son."

Dick took a blanket from the bed. "You coming?"

Merritt shook his head. "I ain't got the guts to try it that way."

Dick went down the tunnel. It curved a little. He lit his candle and went on. Suddenly a pit showed blackly against the floor. He went down on his knees and dropped a small rock into the hole. It thumped faintly far below. He examined the walls.

The pit was a good twenty feet wide. The left-hand wall was smooth. The right-hand wall showed a wide crack just below the edge of the pit. Here and there on the wall were cracks and projections. Dick worked swiftly, ripping the blanket into strips and knotting them together. He slung it over his shoulder, doused the candle and put it into his upper vest pocket. He took off his boots and threw them across, then felt out along the wall until he located the crack. He stretched out his left leg and placed his toes into the crack. He felt along the wall with his hands until he found holds. With a short, silent prayer he pulled himself erect and placed all his weight on the foot.

HE INCHED out. Sweat began to trickle clammily down his sides. Bits of rock broke loose and pattered far below. He worked his way out, feeling and testing each handhold. For a time he clung there, the cold draft from the tunnel chilling him. Then, inch by inch, he went on until he found a firm handhold. He felt for the candle and held it in his mouth. He struck a match and lit it. He held it across his chest and looked back.

He was halfway across. The wall looked too smooth for any more progress. A thick prop had pulled away from the wall on the far brink and lay with one end projecting over the pit. Its base end was buried in other timbers and loose rock.

Dick set the candle on the projection beside him. Cautiously he felt for his improvised blanket rope and formed a noose in it. He shifted grips and held the rope in his left hand, the end held between the thumb and forefinger and the noose resting on the other fingers. He swung and cast the noose. It fell short. He drew it back and tried again. It hit the timber and fell back. He hung there for a long time with his eyes closed. The muscles in his back began to ache. His right leg was numbing from the strain. He tried again. The noose fell over the timber. Carefully he drew it taut.

He put out his candle and placed it in his pocket. He gripped the rope with his left hand, hesitated a moment and then crossed his right hand over, gripping the rope as he fell backwards. He swung against the wall of the pit, just below the timber, almost letting go with the shock. He hung, spinning slowly as the blanket rope stretched with the strain. The timber creaked and settled a little. Sweat trickled down his body, soaking his shirt. He scrabbled with his feet for a hold.

Suddenly the rope gave. He tried to pull up on it to reach the beam. His feet swung out and touched a ledge. He let go of the rope with his right hand and felt out in front of him in the inky dark. Then the rope snapped. With a sob he thrust out his hands. His arms hooked over a wide ledge, but his legs hung down without a hold. Slowly he stretched out his right arm, touching a big rock. He gripped it and pulled himself up onto the ledge. He lay there for a long time with his face pressed against the cool rock. His heart pounded and he ached all over.

Fumblingly, he drew out the candle and lit it. He had fallen to the lower level of the mine. The passage stretched out in front of him. The faint sound of voices came from the upper tunnel. He pinched out the candle and crawled into the tunnel. Feet pounded against the floor of the upper level. Yellow light filled the pit, but Dick was well back in the darkness.

"Can you see him, Ed?" It was the voice of Joe Pettis.

"Hell no. It's a hundred feet at least."

"We won't have to worry about taking care of him then."

"Let's get to work on Merritt now. He'll write that letter, or I'll work him over to a turn."

He waited until they were gone and then moved up the tunnel on his hands and knees. It was a damned good thing for him they hadn't spotted the end of rope noosed about the timber. He lit the candle and plodded on. The cool draft swept against his face. It seemed hours before he found a ladder leading up to the upper level. He followed the level. The draft was stronger.

Suddenly he almost shouted. A ray of light pierced the darkness ahead.

He ran forward. Against the left hand wall was a pile of crumbled rock. A hole about the size of his head was above it and sunlight streamed through. He climbed up the rock and set to work, removing loose pieces until he could push through. He tumbled out on a slope of rock.

An hour later he lay down in a clump of brush and studied the house. A pack mule was tethered near the front door. Joe Pettis appeared, leading two saddle horses. He looked up at the mine entrance.

Ed came to the entrance. He held up a piece of paper.

"I got it!" he yelled. Joe dropped the reins and walked up toward Ed. "You take care of him?"

"You can do it. I did Tyler in. You ain't goin' to be able to hold that over my head."

Joe cursed and drew his Colt. He spun the cylinder.

Dick got up and ran in the shelter of the brush toward the horses. The butt of a carbine showed above the saddle of the nearest one. It was fifty yards across the open to the horse. He burst out of the brush and slammed his feet down hard, heading for the horse.

"What the hell!" roared Ed. He dragged at his Colt.

Dick reached the horse and gripped the carbine. A pistol cracked. The slug rapped against the saddle. Dick levered a cartridge into the chamber as Joe fired again. He fired from the hip. Ed plunged down the slope, towards them.

Dick ran, snapping a shot at Joe, who spun about and gripped his left shoulder. Then he was behind the house. A bullet chewed into a log not an inch from his head. He pushed open a window and tumbled into the house as Ed rounded the corner. He ran to the front door and kicked it open.

Joe was running slowly toward the house, gripping his shoulder. Dick's slug smashed into his belly. He grunted and went down. Ed fired from the side of the house. The slug plucked at Dick's shirt. Dick's shot sent splinters flying against Ed's face. He staggered back, thumbing back the hammer of his Colt. Dick levered another cartridge into the chamber, threw up the carbine and squeezed off. Ed fell against the side of the house, dropped his Colt and sank slowly to the ground.

"Joe!" he called, "Joe!"

Then he was still, his eyes staring unseeingly at Dick.

THE powdersmoke drifted off before the wind. Dick went up to Joe and rolled him over. He was dead. Dick climbed the slope and went into the mine. He took the key from where it hung on the wall and opened the lock.

Sam Merritt appeared. He blinked. "For the love of—how did you get here?"

Dick grounded his carbine. "It's a long story, Sam."

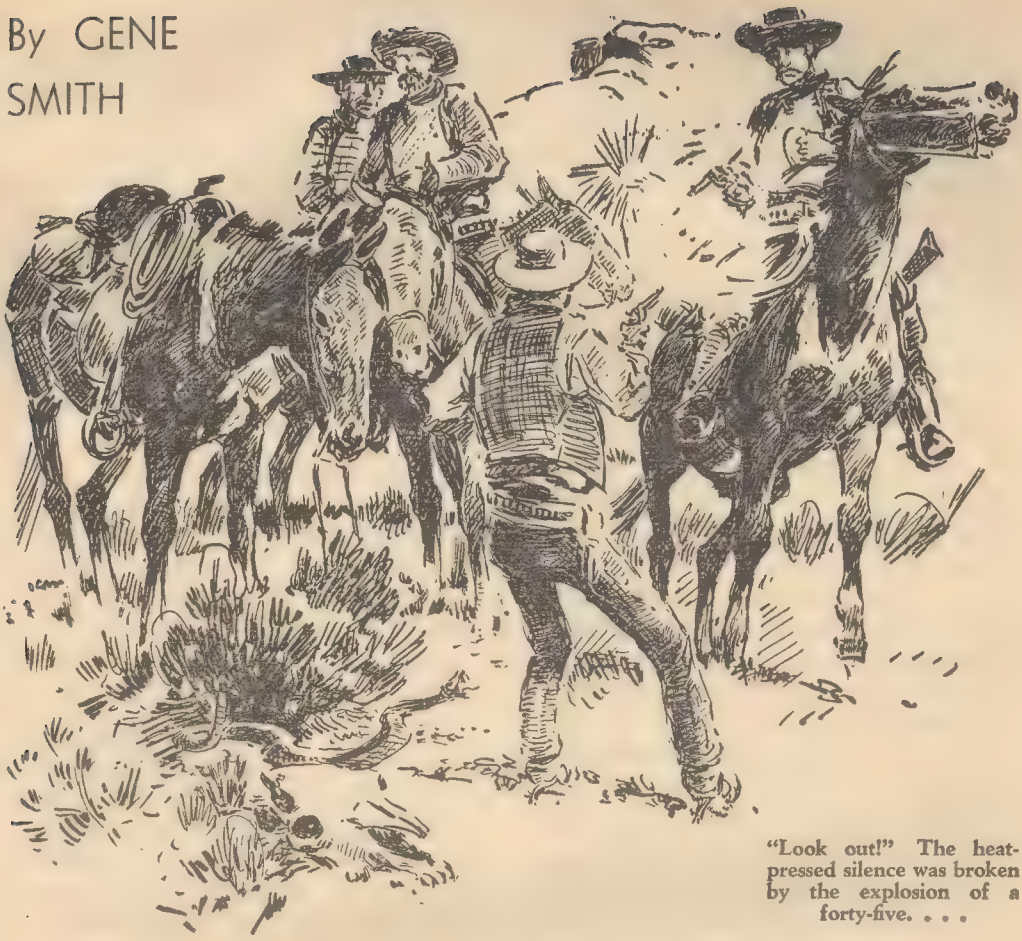
"Ed and Joe?"

Dick tapped the carbine. "Dead."

"I don't know how you did it, son."

Dick looked back down the slope. The wind ruffled Ed's shirt. "It was close. Too damned close." He'd be glad to leave there. Killing had never been to his taste. But the job was done. High Peaks had been the end of his quest. ● ● ●

By GENE SMITH



"Look out!" The heat-pressed silence was broken by the explosion of a forty-five. . . .

DESERT RECKONING

There was a fortune in gold in the desert, Joe Hinton found—but it wouldn't buy a drop of water or give an inch of shade—it just let you die rich!

BIG ALEC'S voice rasped like a file, "Quit lookin' at that watch."

Joe Hinton hastily slid the timepiece into his shirt pocket and loosened his collar with long, supple fingers. The time was a minute past midday. But something about the way the riders were looking at him caused him to keep the information to himself. They wouldn't appreciate being

told it was already beyond the noon hour.

Joe Hinton told himself that he had more important things to consider than the hunger pinching his stomach. He was remembering a painting that used to hang in his father's watchmaking shop in Tennessee. It showed a cow in the grip of a blizzard and surrounded by tongue-lolling wolves. He felt in precisely the same position as the bovine, except that these men were two-legged wolves—and, of course, the weather was different.

It was hot out here at the desert edge. So hot, in fact, that a fellow got a smothering sensation from the shimmering heat layers which rose from the wasteland and were flogged back by the whip of the sun's rays. The sweat broke out on him, sticking with sirupy thickness. He wiped his brow, started a hand again for the watch, thoughtfully halting it before he touched the gold timepiece.

Big Alec's impressive shoulders shook with laughter. He had shrewd eyes and a face almost entirely hidden by a black beard.

"You're a time-minded son," he said. "We couldn'ta found a better one to mind the hosses. Cost us handsome, though." There was mockery in his voice. "You ever paid twenty dollars for ten minutes watchin' in yore trade?"

Joe was ordinarily mild tempered. His father had remarked once, "It'd take an earthquake to jar him out of plodding good humor, him liking to tinker with little wheels and springs and the like—"

But Joe Hinton figured what was building up inside him now was something like an earthquake, or volcano. He itched to slap the bearded face. Nevertheless, caution made him say, "Ten minutes would be time enough for minor adjustments only. Not enough for pay—any kind."

"Now ain't yuh the foolish one?" Big Alec put his animal close and peered full into Joe Hinton's face. It was a bony face, freshly sunburned, and held eyes with slightly dilated pupils—result of the concentration required by his profession. It gave an impression of keenness of vision—a fact which Big Alec could appreciate.

The big man bellowed, "Fellows, we're trailing with a honest man."

Joe shifted uneasily in the saddle. His horse, a black, kept up nervous foot movements and kept chomping the bit. Some of the uneasiness carried to the rider and suddenly Joe Hinton was saying, "I'm turning back. I'll face the music."

Consternation met his words. Three pair of eyes centered upon him.

Ned, the little outlaw, muttered "Damn fool," while Kim Kulurs, as tall as Joe but thinner, stroked his mustache reflectively.

Big Alec voiced opposition. "What if I say no?" he demanded.

"Then," said Joe, "you'll have to make it stick."

They had taken his gun but there was a carbine in a saddle scabbard. Reaching down, he caught the rifle stock, jerked it out. But before he could level on them a slug tore the rifle from his grasp, splintering wood, and causing the black almost to unseat him. The slug was followed by the blast of a forty-five.

For a moment Joe was busy staying on the rearing black. When he got the animal under control, he caught the glittery-eyed Ned, smoking gun in hand. Ned was dwarf-size but a man-size hate rode him, showing in his weasel face and snarling lips.

"Damn fool," the outlaw spat for the second time. His finger started to tighten the trigger again.

Big Alec put his horse against Ned's roan, spoiling his aim. The shot whistled harmlessly past Joe Hinton. "Hold it," Big Alec bellowed. "I'll learn 'im to mind his manners."

Joe Hinton slid off the black. Fired by his dislike of the outlaw's high-handedness, he met him with fists ready. What followed was an exhibition of inexperience—though Joe was game—pitted against brute trickery

of a man who knew rough and tumble and had no scruples against using questionable tactics.

Joe got in a couple of quick blows at Big Alec's eyes, causing him to give ground and bringing a grunt of pain. Then he felt the force of the big man's rush. For a moment he caught sight of the bearded face close, shrewd eyes dancing, and felt the outlaw's foul breath. Then he was aware that Big Alec had his throat in an arm-encircling hug.

The breath was crushed from him. Blackness closed in just as he heard Kulurs say, "Stop now or he's a dead duck."

Big Alec must have turned him loose at that for he felt himself falling. At the same time he was breathing precious air again. The ground slammed into him and he lay there gasping.

The big outlaw said, "He's got spunk. Plenty of it."

"Yeah." Ned spat an oath, "But a rope'll be around his neck five minutes after he's seen in Lingo. He's in this as much as—"

"He ain't goin' back," said Big Alec.

JOE HINTON was able to climb to his feet, where he stood uncertainly. He saw the tall outlaw, Kim Kulurs, take a black kit from his saddle bags and from it he produced a bottle. With a piece of cotton he applied the contents to Big Alec's eyes, now beginning to swell. Joe stared.

"We carry our own doc," explained the big outlaw, grinning. "Kulurs is a real licensed medico."

Joe caught a note of sadness about the tall outlaw. His mouth was drawn to a white line. Finishing, he returned the kit to his bags.

He said, "Lead us to the waterhole, Joe, or we'll be bait for the buzzards."

Big Alec shot a quick, hot look at Kulurs as if to reassert his right to command. Then without saying anything, he headed his animal into the waste of sand, yucca upthrusts and an occasional cactus. The little outlaw, Ned, went next, keeping his eyes glued to the money sack which swung from Big Alec's saddle and held twenty thousand dollars. Joe Hinton followed, and Kim Kulurs brought up the rear.

They were taking the long chance at finding the water, for they knew that no posse would follow into the desert. If they were lucky, they would continue into Mexico to live off the loot and, when it was gone, to strike another border town. The three renegades, thought Joe Hinton, had their stake with them and ahead of them. But what about himself?

He shrugged. His mind reached back to the incident in Lingo early that morning when he had come across the three outlaws for the first time.

It had been the seventh day of his own job-seeking without benefit of encouragement. It had left him with a temptation to sell the gold watch, a product of his own making and an amulet to the search he hoped to conclude before he settled in the range country. When he had walked past the three men at the rail, Big Alec asked if he would hold their horses for a twenty dollar bill. He had jumped at the chance—mostly because his hunt had led him to Big Alec's stamping grounds—knowing that all was not as it should be.

But this had been an eagerness fueled by the memory of a woman in front of the make-shift tent up the street and the five year old boy playing beside her. And of an empty provision box.

It had taken only the ten minutes Big Alec had specified. They had returned with the sack and from it, laughingly, Big Alec had paid him the twenty dollar bill.

While the men mounted, lead began to sing about. Joe lost his hat to the marksmanship of irate citizens forming a posse down the street, and he had suddenly realized the implication of his chore. In desperation, and at Big Alec's shouted invitation, he had taken the extra horse at the rail, and had ridden with the outlaws.

Now, as he followed the dwarf-sized Ned, the worried look of his wife struck him again. She hadn't wanted to leave Tennessee, had wanted him to take a job in her father's grocery business. But she had agreed when he explained that he would never be happy out of his craft.

He wanted to come West and work until he had saved enough to start his own business, he told her—though his main reason had been different altogether.

There had been no jobs. What little money they had, dwindled away. He had sold articles of value until the watch alone remained. He didn't want to turn it loose. There were reasons—perhaps he was looking for a man with an identical timepiece. Sometimes when he thought of an alternative, an unaccustomed chill settled on his heart.

SPECULATING on his position, the chances for escape, Joe Hinton was surprised when his horse halted. Big Alec and Ned had stopped and were talking in low tones.

"I tell yuh I been to this hole," declared the bearded outlaw. "Me and this prospector. He—uh—just up and died there and that left me all the gold. Find his bones and we'll be at the water."

Ned was gazing across the wind-whipped layers of sand. Suddenly he put his animal into motion, stopping by a yucca plant. Looking, Joe saw something white. Ned got down, kicked at the object.

A grunt of disgust escaped him. "Dämn donkey's skull."

He started to climb back on his horse, but the three men were staring, horrified, at the white object. There had been movement, the quick, backward motion of a rattler's head.

Joe Hinton saw and, by the quick intakes of breath, knew the others had seen. He sat paralyzed, wishing for the gun they had taken from him. He saw Big Alec kick his horse forward, heard him bellow, "Look out!"

The heat-pressed silence was broken by the explosion of a forty-five.

It was the little outlaw, Ned, who had fired—and at Kim Kulurs. Hearing Big Alec's warning shout, he had looked up to see Kulurs drawing his gun. Thinking the outlaw was gunning him, and deadly fast himself, Ned drew and shot the doctor. At the same time the rattler struck his leg. Ned kicked the reptile across the sand.

A second shot boomed. The rattler writhed on the ground headless.

Ned holstered his gun. His face was a white mask. "Got me," he snarled, "in the leg. And we're miles from anyplace—"

Suddenly he was running to where Kim Kulurs, mortally wounded, slumped in his saddle. The little fellow eased him down, stretched him on the sand. "You gotta save me," he whispered. "You gotta save me before you die."

Big Alec moved up. "He's dyin' a'ready. Gimme yore knife, I'll—"

Big Alec broke off as Kulurs, blood spreading across his shirt and his eyes holding a starry glitter, whispered, "I've got five, maybe ten minutes left. My kit's there in the saddle bags. I'd have time enough to save you, but I'll be damned if I lift a hand." Irony twisted his mouth.

Ned pleaded, "Dammit Kulurs, I—"

Joe, off his animal now, saw Kulurs shaking his head. After a while he jerked twice and then lay still.

Ned became a wild man. He put two rapid shots into the stiffening body.

Big Alec grabbed his hand. "Don't desecrate the dead," he roared. "Hold still—I told you I'd fix you."

Fascinated, Joe watched as Big Alec tore away part of Ned's pant leg. Then he split the flesh with a long-bladed knife. The bearded face lowered and when it came up, after a moment, Big Alec puckered and spat viciously into the sand. Watching, Joe was surprised not to see any blood. Big

Alec was grinning now, running his sleeve across his mouth. "Good as the doc could've done." He seemed eager.

Still thinking about it, Joe watched the big man push Ned toward his animal. Big Alec said, "Now there'll only be a three-way split."

"Three?" Ned stopped. He glared up into Big Alec's whiskery face. "I just eliminated the third party," he said meaningly.

"There's the tinkerer."

"You mean—" Ned laughed. "You're kidding." But he bristled when he saw Big Alec was serious. "This a trick to get me to take care of him like I done the doc?" Ned's gun was in his hand, coming up.

Swiping a hammy fist, Big Alec knocked the gun aside. Sand kicked up where the bullet hit. Uneasy, Joe watched Big Alec pin Ned against his horse.

"We got a job to do," said Big Alec, "finding the water. Fightin' amongst ourselves won't help. We need 'im to help us spot that waterhole and he goes on an equal basis."

Ned glowered suspiciously. Suddenly the tension all seemed to go out of him. Shrugging, he turned to mount.

"Okay," he said. "My leg hurts like hell."

They were about to ride when Joe said, "What about him?" He inclined his head toward Kulurs.

"Leave 'im to the buzzards," Ned spat. "Let's get the hell on."

"What you got on yore mind?" demanded Big Alec.

Joe said, "We ought to bury him. And—we ought to notify his next of kin."

Big Alec squinted at the sun through badly swollen eyes. "No time fer buryin'," he said. "But go ahead and search 'im."

Joe's fingers rustled inside Kulur's clothes, passing over the hard metal of a derringer and stopping on a well-filled wallet. Still thinking about the derringer, and speculating on Big Alec's sudden interest in him, he tossed the wallet toward the two riders. They were thrown into momentary confusion, as each reached a hand for it.

Joe stooped to the body of Kulurs. When he came erect he had the derringer inside his shirt.

TWO hours later, by the watch he looked at without reproof from Big Alec, the three were far into the desert waste. And there was no lessening in the rays of the sun. Ahead, Ned clung desperately to his animal. Beyond, Big Alec's broad back swayed with the movement of his horse. Joe's mouth was dry, swollen, his eyes inflamed. And he knew his animal couldn't make it much longer without water. Then he saw it happen.

Ned's animal stopped. It stood uncertainly—then its knees suddenly gave way. Ned spilled frontwise. When Joe dismounted to lend a hand to the little outlaw, he could only stare.

The soft, wispy sound of Big Alec's horse, returning, brought Joe erect. Big Alec had come back. His whiskery, matted face looked gaunt; his eyes were almost shut.

"I was listenin'," he muttered, "when I didn't hear 'im comin' no more I came back."

Joe said, "It wasn't the snake only that done for him."

"Huh?" Big Alec's heavy face held suspicion.

"The doc," explained Joe. "Refusing to treat him."

"Oh."

Big Alec seemed to be satisfied, but Joe was remembering the outlaw's conduct back there at the donkey's skull. He had merely simulated sucking the wound, while it was in his mind to let Ned die. There was more than one snake involved in Ned's death.

"Ned was game," said Big Alec, wiping a hand across his eyes, "game as a cock. But Kulurs was weak. He let Ned

talk 'im into the owlhoot and always wanted to quit. Always bad blood between them for that. That's why Ned thought Kulurs was pulling on him. Well—" the outlaw started to slap Joe's back, missed and brushed his shoulder—"we won't have to split with them, eh?"

Big Alec was doing his best to grin. But it was more like a leer. He looked peculiar to Joe.

Joe Hinton didn't answer. He looked across the glistening sand. It was like a furnace, fired by the sun dropping toward the horizon. Ten thousand dollars. Or—twenty thousand dollars?

Big Alec laughed a dry cackle, humorless, nerve-jerking. "Come on tinkerer," the outlaw said. "If you can find what's the matter with a stoveup watch, you can shorely spot a waterhole." The big man waited for Joe to take the lead.

Wondering, Joe rode ahead. Did Big Alec want to keep an eye on him now that they were alone? Something Big Alec had said back there stuck in Joe's mind, about Big Alec not hearing him and Ned following, and going back to find the little outlaw dead.

The big outlaw had said, *"When I didn't hear 'im comin' no more I came back."* Was Big Alec depending upon hearing alone?

Looking back quickly, Joe saw the outlaw, head sunk on chest, hands gripping saddle horn, apparently oblivious to what was going on. Joe was about to wave his hand to see if Big Alec noticed, when something glistening caught his eye. The blood pounded along his veins.

Looking back as he was, he had failed to see the bones until they swung into his vision beside the trail. They were in a small depression. There was a grinning skull, bleached white, and there was a hand, an arm. And beside the skeleton, sunlight reflected from gold and brought a tightening to the throat of Joe Hinton.

Checking his impulse to draw up, Joe kept going, all the while watching Big Alec. When the outlaw rode by the skeleton without noticing, he became convinced that the big fellow was blind. That's why he had put Joe in front. And that explained his sudden friendliness, his promise of a cut of the loot.

Joe Hinton's hand slipped inside his shirt and closed around the derringer. He stopped his animal.

Big Alec pulled up, ten steps away. "What's up?" he demanded.

Joe didn't answer. He stared past the outlaw into the hollow. Something was wrong about it. There was no water. The breath of a breeze rustled sand across the dry ground. The skull kept grinning.

"There're your bones," Joe said thickly.

Big Alec's head came up, nostrils flaring. "Where, man?"

"To your left about five paces."

The big man was off his animal. His feet brushed the skeleton and he was down on his hands and knees, feeling in the sand. He sifted it through his fingers, thrashing about. After awhile he stopped. He stood up.

"The water?" he said.

"Nothing but the sand," said Joe.

BIG ALEC took two uncertain steps toward his horse. All the swagger and bravado were gone. He stopped. Then he laughed.

The laugh grew into a howl, bringing the chill to Joe's spine. Tears streamed down the outlaw's cheeks, washing sand from his beard. Still he laughed like one gone mad. Now he was on his knees again, scooping up great handfuls of the stuff and flinging it about.

The outlaw stopped laughing. Joe saw that he was holding up the thing that glinted gold. It was a watch the size of Joe's own. Big Alec had brushed against it. Fear stamped upon his face now.

"Where are you?" the outlaw demanded hoarsely, still clutching the watch.

Joe Hinton remained quiet.

Big Alec called his name again. Still Joe was silent.

"Speak, man," said the outlaw, pleadingly. "We're not whipped. With yore eyes we'll make it. Only twenty miles to the Mexican border. Say you'll show me the way. Ten thousand in it for you. There's the shop you've been wanting."

Joe said, "No soap, Alec. I'm heading back for Lingo."

"Without water? You'll never make it. And they'd hang you if you did."

"Sorry," Joe said. "Unhitch your belt and drop your holsters, if you want me to try and save your hide."

Big Alec gripped the watch. "Then it's true," he said slowly. "His name was Hinton, Old Thad Hinton. He came from Tennessee five years back to prospect for gold. We formed a partnership—the watch. I shoulda knowed."

"I made them," said Joe quietly. "One for him and one for me. They were identical. I gave him his when he got the gold fever. When his letters stopped coming, I swore I'd find him some day. When I spotted that watch a while ago I knew I'd found him. He was a tinkerer—taught me all I know. But the gold fever spoiled him for his craft. That's why I—well, I'll get my shop but it'll be the—"

"The honest way," snarled Big Alec. He was facing Joe. "Fool," he spat. Then he was heading that way, his hands filled with the forty-fives.

Death ripped and whispered through the air about Joe's head. The bearded figure came on, mad, huge, unable to see, but shooting by sense and sound.

Joe brought out the derringer. "Stop," he called, "or I'll kill you."

Big Alec kept coming. "You're unarmed," he said. Now he was close. Joe had counted the shots. The outlaw had two left. Big Alec bumped into Joe's leg. Two forty-fives, as big as cannons it seemed, loomed in the face of Joe Hinton. Joe pulled the trigger on the derringer.

A foolish look swept the outlaw's face. The guns dropped. As he slumped groundward, he said, "Tricked by a damn tinkerer—"

BIG ALEC was dead a minute after he hit the ground. The derringer had torn a hole in his giant chest, reaching the vital sections of his heart. A search of the area showed Joe Hinton the prospector's tools, abandoned by Big Alec almost four years before when he killed his partner and took all the gold.

By moonlight, Joe dug the grave where he intended to place the final remains of old Thad Hinton. The watch he intended to bury with him. But at four feet he struck the water that had been lost, in the years, by shifting sands. So he buried Old Thad and the timepiece a hundred yards to the west. Then he took the two horses, rested now after drinking of the precious fluid, and he headed back over the desert.

He guessed that when he brought the twenty thousand back to Lingo, and evidence that he'd avenged his father's death by killing the holdup leader, that the people of the cowtown would understand his own part in it. And the price on the head of the outlaw, near a thousand, could get him started in the shop. It would be blood money—Big Alec's, but also Old Thad Hinton's. So it wouldn't bother him to take it. ● ● ●

Even when he shot a man in the back, Ace stayed within the law. There was no way to trap him, Lieutenant Forester found—save putting his own neck in a killer's noose!

WEIGHTED by dust, dank with sweat, Luke slouched into heat-raddled Medicine Bend near sundown. He rode with a cavalryman's easy seat in the saddle. Boxed in by buildings after the protecting space of prairies, he knuckled his hand on his thigh near the butt of his gun, and studied in turn every staring town idler. Most men noticed him.

He reined in at McCabe's livery stable, dismounted and gave his surroundings a final check before letting the tension out of his heavy shoulders. Then he unsaddled and silently helped himself to a sponge and buckets of water.

"Fine lookin' mare, stranger," said Mc-

WHILE BOOTHILL WAITS

By R. W. DALY

Luke knelt, Army style, for a steady shot as the kid whipped about. . . .

Cabe conversationally, appraising the gaunt but well-shaped flanks. "A little beat."

"Yeah," Luke grunted, washing her back and sponging out her eyes, nose and mouth. He then made a straw wisp, showing no signs of sociability, so McCabe curbed his curiosity and resumed his own work.

Luke thoroughly dried the mare, gently currycombed the white, saltish dust out of her black coat, and finally brushed her until she glistened like polished ebony. He affectionately patted her full, firm chest and let her have some water which had warmed enough to drink.

"Got a stall?"

"Help yourself," McCabe said, jerking a thumb towards the back of the stable.

Luke put a hand on his mare's neck and led her in, picked out a stall, and made a bed of fresh straw. McCabe came up with a bucket in hand.

"I'd like a feed of oats," Luke said.

"Beat you to it, stranger." McCabe grinned. "A man as particular as you about a bronc would only want the best."

"Thanks," Luke smiled. He was a whip-like thirty, broad-shouldered and loose in his movements. He rubbed his stubbly, weather-cracked face and let the weariness from a long ride show in the crowsfeet

tracking around his squinting blue eyes. "My name's Forester," he said. "Now, where can I get a bath?"

"Bath?" McCabe chuckled. "Try the National down the street."

Luke picked up his saddlebags. "How do I find the Evans spread?"

McCabe turned away from putting the oats in the manger. His old eyes went worried. "I'd go easy on that question, son," he advised. "Some saddle tramps might not cotton to it."

"Who?" Luke asked easily. "And why?"

"Heard of a man named Ace Steel?"

"Yeah," Luke murmured, his hand absently brushing the heavy .45 Army Colt in the holster thonged tight to his right thigh, in the unconscious gesture of a man careful of his possessions. "I've heard of him."

"Ace owns this town. Bill Evans bucked Ace when Ace started to spread out. Bill's dead now. 'Course no one out and out says Ace done it. Not to his face. But no one else had a reason for dry-gulchin' Bill. Ace is mighty touchy 'bout it—he's liable to be touchy about anybody asking for Evans." McCabe studied him thoughtfully.

"Bill was handy with a gun," Luke said. "They'd have to get him like that."

McCabe grinned in sudden inspiration. "You ain't a cowhand. You're a yellowleg and you knew Bill in the Army. So'jers have a way of lookin' alike."

"What's the sheriff done about the murder?" Luke asked, neither confirming nor denying McCabe's deduction.

"Nothin' he could do. Ace is too smart. There ain't nothin' but a guess to tie him in. Sheriff's old, but he'd throw down on Ace if he had any evidence. Bill jest got shot and that's that."

Luke slung the saddlebags over his left shoulder. "I'd like to pay my respects to Mrs. Evans."

"Take the right fork out of town," McCabe said. "She's six miles out."

"I'll want my horse in the morning," Luke said and stalked out into the street.

FORESTER had no trouble locating the National Hotel. He steered for the loudest noise. This came from the Lucky Ace Saloon which was right next to the hotel. He got a room, washed, put on a clean shirt, oiled his Colt to get drifting dust worked out of the action, then went down to the lobby.

He stood near the foot of the stairs long enough to examine and dismiss the loungers. He glanced at the U. S. Post Office cubbyhole alongside the desk, moodily pulled a tailormade from a box, struck a match, sucked in and exhaled a lungful of smoke, then strolled to lean on the desk.

"What does Ace Steel look like?" he asked the clerk conversationally.

"Mr. Steel," the clerk said carefully, "is as tall as yourself, Mr. Forester. Heavier." He glanced around the lobby. "If I were you, Mr. Forester, I wouldn't ask around too much about Mr. Steel."

"You're not me," Luke said laconically. "Thanks."

He went into the dining room, where his famished stomach relished a steak despite the price. Satisfied, with new strength flowing into his lean body, he picked up his broadbrimmed slouch hat, tipped the tired waitress with a smile and a dollar, and dropped into the saloon to await the developments he had every reason to expect.

Standing at the bar with the mirror to cover the room, he downed a shot and nursed another. He noted McCabe slipping in with a man who could have been a twin, and guessed correctly that the sheriff had been notified of his arrival. He ignored them, idly watching the rough revelry.

The saloon was jammed to the rafters with cowhands bent on having a big time. Luke's sharp eyes lazily picked out the men who didn't work for a living. They were strategically scattered and he thought

there were far more than necessary to keep peace, particularly two with Winchesters perched on a balcony.

When a door at the back of the room opened, the consequent stirring of men and girls identified Ace Steel. Luke sized him up in a lightning sweep of eyes apparently admiring an overly plump lady showing her charms on top of a nearby table.

Ace was a few inches shorter than Luke and running to fat instead of solid muscle, but his big hands were alertly held, competent. Luke frowned at the absence of a cartridge belt beneath the other man's gray frock coat—his size made it impossible to make out the bulge of a sneak gun.

He guessed he wouldn't have long to wait for Ace's reflection to appear in the mirror, and was concentrating on lighting a cigarette, when he felt a hard jab in his shoulder.

"Who the hell are you, Forester?"

One elbow on the bar, Luke turned and calmly enjoyed the advantage of height in looking down at Steel. "I might be a drifter lookin' for work or I might be a postal inspector. What's it to you?"

"What's your interest in Ace Steel?"

Luke raised his shotglass. "Can't blame a man for bein' careful. I just wanted to know who ran this town."

"A mistake Forester," Steel said contemptuously. "Now you know. Drift by noon, or stay in boothill."

Luke tossed off the redeye and set the empty glass on the bar. "Anyone can make a mistake, Steel," he said slowly, "Even you."

"Drift!"

Luke leaned against the bar for a long minute, his steady eyes taking in the eager faces of the riflemen on the balcony and men here and there in the room, fingering sideguns.

He asked, "Now?"

"Before I make you eat those tailormades!" Steel snapped.

"They wouldn't taste very good," Luke said thoughtfully. "Reckon I'll think it over."

Suddenly, there was a derringer in Steel's left hand. "I'm going to count to three," he snarled. "One—"

"Wouldn't plug a man in the back, would you?" Luke drawled. He started for the door, ignoring the crestfallen looks on the faces of McCabe and the sheriff, who had obviously hoped to back his play. He didn't glance back. He was satisfied to leave well enough alone.

In his room, Luke stonily resisted the temptation of bed. He was bone-weary from the trip down from the Dakota territory, but he couldn't risk sleep now. He put a chair to one side of the window so that he could sit facing the door. He didn't really expect trouble, however, because if Steel ran true to form, he would prefer to do his killing out of town. At the same time, he had spent too many years in a business where a man had only one guess. . . .

No visitors arrived during the night.

HE GRINNED into the shaving mirror. "You damn crawfish, you aren't worth Steel's time—yet." For a while, making a final check of his Colt, he wondered if he shouldn't have taken the showdown offered at the saloon. Then he tightened his lips. He had to do a little visiting first.

When he turned in his key, the rabbity clerk looked at him with an imitation of Steel's contempt.

"Leaving so soon, Mr. Forester?"

Saddlebags in hand, Luke left a message to be delivered to Ace Steel. "I plan to stay with Mrs. Evans for a few days," he said and smiled faintly as the scorn evaporated in the clerk's eyes. If Steel wasn't able to remember the name of Forester after that, then Steel didn't have the brains of a prairie dog.

Luke found contempt when he got his mare, too, though it was mixed with sad-

ness as McCabe watched him saddle up. He understood.

"Here's your bill," McCabe said.

Luke unlimbered his binoculars and slung them on the pommel. Then he hung his saddlebags on a wallpeg. McCabe gaped.

"Aimin' to be back," Luke said.

"You can't make it by noon, son."

"That'll be too bad, won't it, old-timer?" Luke smiled.

"You know what you're doin'?"

"Sure," Luke said easily and mounted. "I'm going to get some evidence for your friend, the sheriff."

"We'll be with you, Forester."

"Thanks, McCabe. See you later."

He took his time, riding through town, holding the mare to a walk. He went by the saloon, so that early-morning loafers could see he was riding light.

On the outskirts of town, he let her settle some of her oats. When she had worked up a little sweat, he slowed her to a walk. The wagon ruts wound through the low ground of a buffalo trail, through scrubby underbrush and around rocks that had rolled down from the rough hills long before white men had come to America.

With eyes trained to find signs of the elusive Sioux, Luke made certain there were no fresh marks on the way to the Evans homestead. He rode on until he came to a clump of boulders. Thirty yards beyond these, he grinned and began to ride back and forth at right angles across the trail before circling down to one side to a patch of greasewood trees. Here he dismounted, leaving his mare and proceeded on foot back to the boulders.

He was entirely unsurprised, when he heard the sound of a horse, ridden hard. He hitched up his gunbelt and stood with his back screened by the rock. His wait wasn't long. A rider rocketed through the boulders lining the road, galloping furiously, and then almost slid the pony onto his hindquarters when he sighted the confused trail.

The rider curvetted on the spot, his eyes darting about. Luke recognized him as one of the men in the saloon who had watched him leave Medicine Bend.

"Reach!" Luke called.

The rider turned, whipping a hand down across his chest for a backhanded draw and thought better of his impulse.

"Turn to the offside and dismount." Luke ordered.

The gunman was barely into his twenties. Luke recognized the type, too lazy for honest work that might slow down the greased reflexes that made him valuable to Ace Steel. The kid would make a play for his gun in the split second he thought he saw an opening.

"What do you want?" the kid snarled.

"The man who killed Bill Evans," Luke said evenly. "Did you?"

"I don't have to shoot a man in the back," the kid said, flushing with visible anger. "I don't have to get the drop, either."

Luke studied the kid's undaunted chin and eyes, seeing where it would go against the grain of this youngster to build a reputation on bushwhacking. Then anger seeped out of him.

"Why'd you trail me?"

"Ace wants to see you."

"Dead or alive?"

The kid shrugged indifferently. "Either, I reckon."

Luke smiled. "Who killed Bill Evans?"

"You expect an answer?" The boy spat in the dust. "I seen you crawl, Forester. Why don't you ask Ace about Evans? Better do it by noon."

"Maybe I will," Luke said, still smiling, because the kid had angrily implicated Ace in Bill's murder.

"My arms are tired," the kid complained. "Go ahead and shoot. I oughta be shot anyway for ridin' into your setup."

"Shoot?" Luke said. "I'm not in Ace's string, kid. I want you to tell him for me that I'll be back to see him before sundown.

Tell him I'm going to get the son who cut down my best friend without a chance."

The kid's eyes gleamed with hope. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Luke said. "Now, don't do anything sudden. You've a lot to learn before you grow into those guns. Mount up."

The kid obediently turned towards his pony, felt with a thrill the push of blood back into his lowered hands, thought of his credit with Ace Steel when he brought in the stranger, and made up his mind in an instant, as Luke casually holstered his Colt.

The kid went for his guns.

LUKE caught the dropping of shoulders and knelt, Army style, for a steady shot as the kid whipped about, guns smoking. Bullets spanged into the granite behind Luke and showered him with fragments. Had he been on his feet, one of the slugs would have caught him high in the chest. As it was, he had time before the kid could cock the single-action hammers to squeeze the trigger for an aimed shot.

The kid yelped and dropped his guns to clutch at a smashed shoulder that forever ended his pretensions to being a two-fisted gunman. The shock hurled him backward for a few spaghetti-legged steps that looked like a drunken jig. He sank down, teeth clenched against pain and shame.

Luke holstered his Colt and walked over. The boy glared at him as he got his canteen. "You might tell Ace not to send a boy on a man's errand," he said, ripping off the blood-stained shirt.

The kid bared teeth like a wounded wolf at the insult. "You ducked, you yellabelly!" He did not, however, resist Luke's experienced bandaging of the shoulder.

"Sure," Luke admitted cheerfully. "I ducked because you tipped your hand. I didn't kill you because it would have been murder and you're not the polecat I want."

"Murder?" the kid growled, stung even more than by the bullet that had bored through his bones. "I had first shot!"

"Sure," Luke said, "but your hands were shaky from being high. Remember that next time." He straightened up. "You can make it into town now."

The boy stared thoughtfully at him. He seemed to realize for the first time that from first to last he had been entirely at the calculating mercy of the older man.

"Thanks, Forester," he said quietly. "Reckon I'm through. I don't know who killed Evans. Wish I did. Ace plays 'em close to the vest."

"Tell him what I told you."

The kid said, "Ace'll give you the full treatment. Better pull out."

"Give him my message," Luke replied. "It's your funeral, Forester."

Luke silently went to his mare and continued on his way.

By the time he raised the shingles of the Evans ranchhouse, Luke knew the trail as thoroughly as though he had ridden it all his life. There were a hundred places along it where a man could be taken unawares, if he weren't expecting trouble.

He trotted right past the outbuildings and corrals, up to the clapboarded house. Dismounting, he went up the steps. It was near noon. He could hear people chattering inside.

A slim, pretty blonde, clad in a simple gingham dress answered the door.

"Hello," she said.

Luke said, "I'm Luke Forester."

She gasped. "Lieutenant Forester?"

"I came as soon as I could get leave," he said. He smiled. "Miss Sally Evans?"

The girl put a hand on his arm and turned to cry, "Mother! It's Luke Forester!" And then, amazingly, for no reason at all, she put her head under Luke's chin and held him tight and began to weep silently.

Luke was embarrassed. He knew Sally well enough from the yarns Bill used to tell

in the long, hard years when they had ridden with Jeb Stuart in the futile struggle against the Yankees. He also recognized Mrs. Evans the instant she hurried to the door.

"It's so good to see you, Luke," Mrs. Evans said and there were tears forming in her eyes, too, even as she regarded him appraisingly. "Let him go, Sally."

"I'm sorry, Luke," Sally murmured, dabbing at her eyes.

Luke was angry with himself—Sally had changed from the skinny little button that Bill worshipped. Sally was twenty and a woman who could get into a man's blood and in that brief moment he had felt himself stir to her nearness.

Her mother rescued him. "We're at lunch, Lieutenant Forester. Won't you come in and join us?"

HE COULDN'T get down to cases until lunch had stabilized emotions, the weather and scenery had been discussed, and Sally's pie complimented. Then Clancy was called in. Clancy was the foreman, a short, wiry puncher, haggard from overwork.

"This Steel is a cute hombre," Clancy said. "When he wants a spread, he gets it, legal. You been to The Lucky Ace?"

Luke nodded.

"An owner knows he's on Steel's list easy enough. When a ruckus starts at the saloon, somehow the only cowpokes cut down belong to an outfit Ace is trying to break. That does it. Sooner or later, the boys ask for their time. We got two hands left—maybe not for long. Can't blame 'em none."

Luke didn't need any more of the picture. Remembering the layout at the saloon, he could see how Ace could put the finger on anyone he wanted out of the way. All he had to do was get a fracas going. Then Ace could stand up as a champion of the peace while his riflemen tunneled the so-called trouble-makers. It was legal—in a town where law and order were weak.

"Bill thought he had a way around that," Mrs. Evans said, her face showing her age. "He ordered our boys to stay out of Ace's. He fired those who disobeyed."

"It worked," Clancy said and gazed out the window so that he wouldn't see the women's faces. "But Ace found a way around that."

"He's clever," Mrs. Evans said bitterly. "He hasn't been to see us since Bill's death. He knows Clancy and a couple of the boys are all we have left. He knows we can't drive our beef to the railroad."

"When you're starved out," Clancy added, "Ace doesn't have any competitors in the market. You take his offer and git." He looked at Mrs. Evans, dogged loyalty in his eyes. "Me'n the boys are still goin' to get the stock to the railroad or die tryin'."

"You'll never make it," Mrs. Evans said flatly.

"I think he will," Luke said quietly.

Hope bloomed in the rambling living room. Clancy sat on the edge of his chair, Mrs. Evans straightened up, and Sally's face shone like the sun on snow-topped mountains.

Luke reached into his pocket, feeling hot and cold together. "Bill was a little pinched, Mrs. Evans," he said hesitantly. "He wrote and asked me for a small loan. Would you mind looking at this canceled check? I'd like to know what you think of the endorsement."

Mrs. Evans turned the slip of paper over in her hands, then quickly looked up. "A thousand dollars! Why, I had no idea—"

"Please, ma'm," Luke squirmed. "Is that Bill's writing?"

Mrs. Evans looked, then squinted at the back of the check. "Why, Luke," she exclaimed wrathfully. "That isn't Bill's signature and he certainly didn't endorse any thousand dollars over to that catamount."

Luke took back the check. "Any other post office besides the one in Steel's hotel?"

"No," Mrs. Evans said slowly. "All the mail for miles here around goes to the National Hotel."

"That does it," Luke said, taking back the check. "Steel apparently thinks that mail is part of the hotel. That's his mistake. I was positive my letter arrived after Bill was killed. I forgot to mail it because of an Injun scare that hurried us out on a long patrol. Steel was curious about a dead man's mail. Then he was greedy about a thousand dollars that might have gone to waste." He got up. "As soon as the Kansas City bank cleared that check I figured something was wrong."

"Luke!" Sally cried out. "Where are you going?"

Being a turncoat Yankee has some advantages," Luke grinned. "I am empowered to serve a warrant and to take into custody a certain gentleman for grand larceny and rifling the mails. Murder comes later. It's clean and legal, just the way Ace likes things."

Clancy bounced off his chair. "You'll excuse me, ma'm?" he asked gravely.

Mrs. Evans looked from one to the other. "We need a sack of salt, Mike," she replied serenely. "You might get it while you're in town."

"Yes'm," Clancy said.

"Mother!" Sally exclaimed. "You can't just let them—"

"Can't stop them, either," Mrs. Evans said gravely. "Men are stubborn about some things. Come back and stay a while, Luke. We have lots to talk about."

"Thank you, ma'm," Luke said, his eyes on a Spencer carbine over the fireplace. He had seen Bill use that carbine from First Manassas right up to Appomattox. "I'd like to borrow that."

Mrs. Evans nodded.

Luke liked the feel of the hand-smoothed stock as he checked the magazine and levered a cartridge into the chamber. It was the next best thing to having Bill along.

"I'll be back."

He turned and found Sally barring the door.

"It isn't fair to let you go, Luke. You haven't a chance!"

In wonder, he read her anxious, frightened eyes and stiffened himself against the weakening of his will. He wanted to stay and soothe the terror out of her face.

Instead, he looked down, forcing a smile. "There's one difference, Sally," he said. "I'm ready—Bill wasn't."

She stared at his determination, then impulsively drew his head down to hers, kissing him hard. Then she stepped back.

"That makes it a little harder, Sally." He smiled at her. "But makes it all the surer I'll be back."

He went out, mounted and trotted down towards the bunkhouse where Clancy was saddling up.

"With you in a second," Clancy said. "We'll git my boys."

Luke sat quietly, Spencer cradled against his thighs. "I'll be a long time going in. Do you know another way?"

"Sure," Clancy said, puzzled.

"I'll be glad of a hand at the saloon," Luke said. "Suppose you go in your way, get the sheriff, and back my play."

"The trail's shorter," Clancy said doubtfully. "Got a reason?"

"Yeah," Luke said.

"Alone?"

Luke lifted the Spencer. He grinned tightly. "That's kind of a personal question, Clancy."

Clancy slung his saddle onto his horse. "They got him 'bout two miles down the road. I saw him afterwards, an' it looked like there was one on each side the way the bullets hit."

"Thanks," Luke said. "Be seein' you."

TROTTING away from the bunkhouse, Luke caught out of the corner of his eye a flicker of gingham on the house veranda,

but he didn't dare to look. He didn't even dare to think about Sally and the sudden regard she showed for his safety. These were no thoughts for a man riding to war and, leaving the cleared land of the Evans ranch and entering the brush, he found himself as keyed up as he and Bill had been in the hopeful days before Gettysburg.

Luke was sure a trap had been laid for him on the trail ahead. He was sure that Steel was convinced of the need to eliminate him. He had planted every necessary link of knowledge in Steel's mind. By now Steel would have made the connection between his name and the forged check. He would not want Luke back in town.

He took his time, making a thorough search, probing with eyes long used to war. From time to time he dismounted and continued on foot, keeping to the low ground several hundred yards away from the trail, using every scrap of cover.

At another hillock, he repeated his search, and pushed on again, repeating the process again and again until it paid dividends. It was slow and tedious, but, alone in the brush and under a broiling sun, he felt little emotion. His whole being was consecrated to locating his prey, like a starving hunter tracking a deer. He felt no fear that compared with his passion for vengeance.

Then he found them.

He inched up onto a high rock, leveled his binoculars and sighted two men lazing against a barricade of rocks on the other side of a gully. They were within easy range for a crack marksman. Luke was certain to get one, but he wanted them both, and patiently crawled forward.

Spraddled on his stomach, toes out, he tucked the butt of the Spencer into his shoulder. He wanted to shoot and finish, but then he remembered that coyotes ran in packs. Clancy had indicated Bill was caught in a crossfire, and that was good army. So was a two-way ambush, with no quarter given. Luke bottled his temper until he glimpsed a little swirl of smoke in a *bois d'arc* thicket across the trail. He carefully raised his binoculars, hands hooded above the lenses to shield them from the sun.

There was only one man on the other side.

Luke put down the binoculars. Teeth bared in a soldier's snarl, he inched up the short-barreled Spencer. This was where he paid off for Bill. As cold as though he was on the firing line shooting for score, Luke steadied the Spencer until the muzzle stopped its faint waver. He sighted, made allowance for a crosswind, breathed deep and exhaled gently. The Spencer could have been part of a statue.

"Here's one, Bill," he muttered and had no qualms at all about squeezing his hand. The sharp report blasted the pregnant stillness. Angry birds fluttered screechingly into the sky. Across the way a ball of lead smacked into the chest of an amazed ambusher, drilling through in high velocity to spang in a shapeless mass against a boulder. Luke rolled the carbine, aimed and fired.

Bullets screamed over his head as the pair nearest him blindly pumped their Winchesters at the wisp of burned power curling over his head. Having the advantage of height on his hill, Luke crabbed back a dozen yards, reset the sights, and located the pair of frantic gunmen.

The heavy Spencer slug caught one man low in the body. This was army shooting, merciless and effective. The man threw up his arms, gave a protracted scream of agony and writhed helplessly down on his face.

A Winchester ball nicked through the bush beside him, a scant foot from Luke's head. Luke calmly cocked, aimed at the second ambusher who was huddled alongside a rock, and swore when his shot was carried by the wind to spray fragments slashing into the man's face. Luke showed no mercy when the Winchester cracked

(Continued on page 106)

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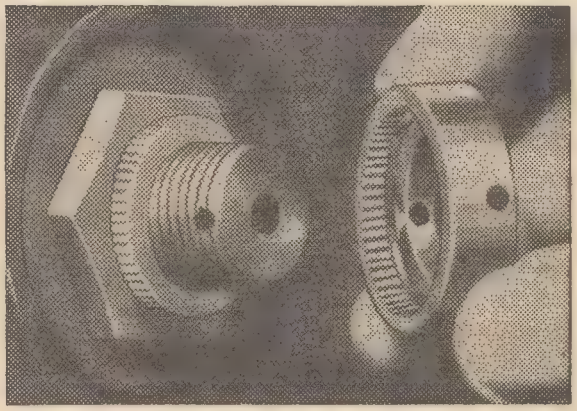

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(Continued from page 104)

defiantly and blindly. Steadying down, Luke shot his man through the head.

PEACE came again to the trail. Luke felt a swift rush of triumph. He had done a part of what he had started out to do. Bill could sleep in peace, even if he didn't manage to bring Ace Steel to account.

He stood up.

Instantly a hornet whined past his body and a red hot razor slashed across his back. He spun and fell limply. Concealed by bushes, he shook his head to clear it of the burning shock. Ace had more respect than Luke had supposed for a lieutenant of the United States Army.

Cursing his own carelessness, Luke inched on his belly back down the slope, away from the direction of the shots. When the ridge covered him, he raced at full speed through the bushes for a hundred yards parallel to the road.

Breath coming in gasps, but momentarily away from danger, he paused to take stock.

It had been a close call, but he could still handle the carbine. He shelled up the magazine and went hunting, this time avoiding the heights and creeping the long way around to a slit in the ridge which carried him through for a view of the road.

He didn't have to bother to search. A pair of men were confidently mounting the slope he had abandoned. Luke swore softly and stood up in full sight, aiming and shouting in one smooth movement. He led too much and missed. The gunmen wheeled and his second shot crashed into one before he could lift a gun. The other got off a hasty shot that snicked through a bush beside Luke before he pitched down the hill into the *bois d'arc* at the side of the trail.

He screwed out the magazine of the Spencer and hunted up his horse.

The sky was pinking in the west when Luke reached the outskirts of Medicine

(Continued on page 108)

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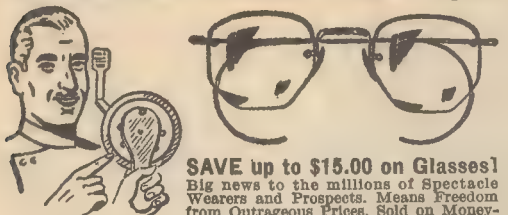

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(Continued from page 106)

Bend. He circled warily to come in on the other side, dank with sweat, and weighted by crusted blood, riding with a cavalryman's easy seat in the saddle, his right hand on the action of the carbine. Idlers scurried out of the way as the mare clopped along the suddenly deserted street. By the time Luke reined in at McCabe's, the pain had seeped down into his boots.

"Hell's bells, man!" McCabe cried. "You're hit!"

Luke gingerly eased out of the saddle. "More blood than hurt," he said. "Feed my horse, will you? She liked those oats."

"Clancy told us you were aimin' to brace Steel. We were waitin' for you. When you didn't show, the sheriff thought mebbe them gunwolves cut you down. He rode out with a posse 'bout ten minutes ago." McCabe talked excitedly while he filled a bucket at his well and brought it over. "I take it the bushwhackin' is over on the Evans trail."

"Yeah," Luke said, as McCabe tenderly cut away the shirt and clucked over the puffed, inflamed wound. "There's a bandage roll in my bags. Would you mind?"

"Mind?" McCabe grinned. "Man, it's an honor!"

McCabe bathed the blood away, swabbed in a dose of turpentine at Luke's request, and stood back with admiring eyes while Luke set his jaw against the agony and himself tied on the top bandage, fiercely hugging the cloth in tight. Luke knew the wound was barely new enough to give him full control of his gunhand, and chose to irritate the swollen, torn muscles before they stiffened.

Luke looked thoughtfully at McCabe, who was old and bowed with work, far too slow for a showdown. He squatted on a nailkeg.

"Mind leavin' word at the sheriff's that I'm in town?"

McCabe promptly took off his leather apron, pointedly buckled on his gunbelt, and said, "Be right back, son."

Luke watched the old man hurry into the street, got up and went to the door, peering down the boardwalk until McCabe disappeared beyond the National Hotel. Then he opened a fresh box of tailormades, enjoyed the first, luxurious bite of strong tobacco, and started for the saloon, Spencer nestled in the crook of his left arm.

MEDICINE BEND was as deserted as though the plague had stalked into town. In the failing light, Luke's eyes were busy. He strode down the exact middle of the road, boots scuffing the dust.

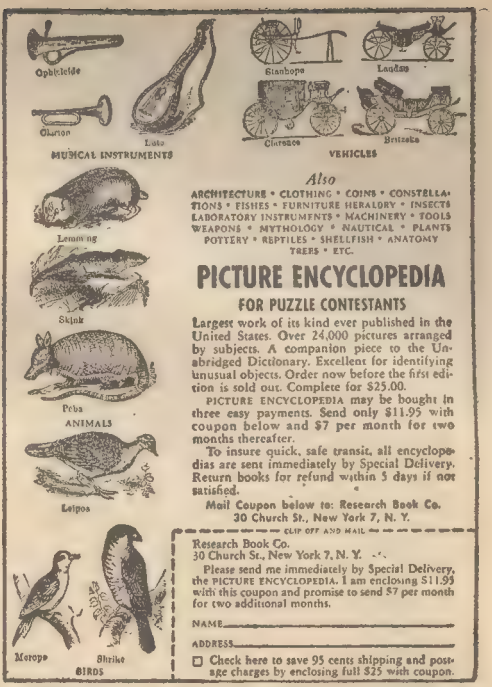
Apprehension sharpened his reflexes. In front of the saloon, he caught the shine of a Winchester suddenly jabbed through an open upstairs window, and automatically raised his left elbow and fired from the hip, just as the muzzle of the Winchester spouted flame. A bullet crashed into his left shoulder, spinning him about in the street, but the Winchester dropped with a thud onto the slanting porch roof.

Dazed, his left arm numb, he made it, on wobbly legs, to the opposite side of the street, taking what shelter he could in the waning light, behind a hitch-rack.

"Tell Steel that Luke Forester is here!" he called. "Ask if he's man enough to come out of hiding when his gunmen don't have the drop on me!"

Propped against the rail, he ground his teeth against the pulsing furnace in his shoulder, and fought the lassitude that tried to seduce him with the pleasures of bottomless sleep.

Steel had to come out. Steel couldn't sneer off a direct challenge and keep his grip on his gang. Luke saw Sally in the glow of lights from the saloon . . . Sally, who was waiting. Then he saw Bill again, and Sally faded. Bill on the day he had stayed behind at Malvern Hill to scoop up a badly-cut saddlemate and carry him away from the charging Yankees. Bill, weak and worn with dysentery after Gettysburg,



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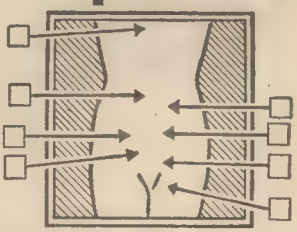

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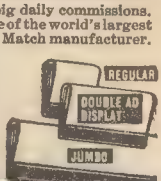

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somehow finding the strength to chop down a Yankee trooper swinging a blade at Luke's unguarded head.

He saw Bill through the years and found the will and passion to stand alone, and wait for Bill's killer to come out and make war. Their last battle.

Then Ace Steel stood outlined between the opened batwings, peering with light-dimmed eyes into the shadowy street.

Luke sighed gently and leaned away from the hitch-rack. With Steel there, he didn't need it to keep him on his feet.

Steel located him, stepped forward.

"I told you to drift, Forester!"

Luke was oblivious to the faces crowding behind Steel and hugging the buildings on either side of the street. He carefully reached into his hip pocket and pulled out a folded envelope.

"This is a warrant for your arrest, Steel. I'm taking you on a charge of grand larceny. I said you made a mistake. It was killing Bill Evans."

Steel's voice was measured. "And yours was to come to Medicine Bend!"

Luke watched Steel's left hand start to travel. Luke had never thought much of speed, but a soldier's gun is a part of him, and as Steel's hand darted, Luke's became a blur of movement.

The Colt slammed viciously in the quiet space between them. Steel was big and took the slug in his guts with only a slight shudder. He swayed with the derringer in his hand, trying to bring it up. Luke fired again.

Steel's brutal face convulsed. He wobbled a step forward before the shock got him. Then he spasmodically clutched the triggers of the sneak gun, both balls slamming harmlessly into the street. He cursed in a strangled voice and pitched forward, settling into a quiet heap amidst a small cloud of dust.

The saloon suddenly racketed with gunfire.

Luke smiled, started to walk towards the fight and his legs turned to water. . . .

There was a droning in his ears. The droning became voices. He wrestled with soft, cloying velvet that smothered his pain, and as he won, the pain awoke. He groaned.

"Luke," Sally whispered in his ear again and again. "Luke."

He opened his eyes. He was sheeted down in an unfamiliar bedroom. Mrs. Evans and Clancy were standing at the foot of the bed. Sally sat beside him.

"Hope I'm not late for supper," he said. It was bright outside.

Sally had his hand and there was feeling in his bandaged fingers that had never been there before. "You'll be all right now," she promised, and the pleasure of her touch and voice trampled down the devils pitchforking his back and shoulder.

"We were inside at The Lucky Ace," Clancy said. "After you dropped Ace, the town moved in and cleaned out the rest. Not that you needed help," he added with a grin. "I come out by the trail."

"You'll have to stay with us for a spell," Mrs. Evans said, and there was as much relief and joy in her tone as though Luke had been Bill. "I hope you don't mind, Luke. You're in Bill's room and it seems kind of right, somehow."

"I like it," Luke said, and looked thoughtfully across at Sally.

"Your shoulder's ruined," Sally said softly. "Maybe you're through with the army."

Clancy, man-wise, held out a lighted cigarette, while Luke tasted the tobacco and knitted his brows and thought about the long patrols and the emptiness of post life and the emptiness in his heart that a home could fill.

"Let's see what happens," Luke suggested contentedly. He added, honestly: "I want to stay. It seems General Custer can get himself another shavetail." ● ● ●

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(Continued from page 43)

he dropped to the ground. Gnawing hatred balled his stomach into a knot.

"Damn you thievin' freebooters! Come out of there and fight!" he stormed.

His yell brought only a laugh from Jamison, and Goss felt the wind of a fresh bullet.

"It ain't no use!" Goss groaned.

"No use? Hell, I'm about to charge!"

"You won't charge more than six inches in that," Goss said raggedly and again his fist tightened in Crotch's belt.

At that moment a remarkable phenomenon took place in Jamison's rifle pit. Crotch lay still, pondering the violent and continual explosions erupting behind the breastwork of earth. He heard Maddix shout and then Jamison's curse. For a brief moment there was stamping about in the pit. Then Maddix appeared at the lip of the bank. Jamison tried to draw him back but Maddix simply dragged Jamison with him into the open. Both men threw down their guns and lifted their arms.

"All right," Goss yelled. "Now charge!"

But Crotch was considerably ahead. The Cocopahs on the company packet were unable to fire without hitting their own captains.

Crotch ran stubbornly on, reached the edge of the gully and heard Jamison say: "Wait! We can make some arrangement! The barges—"

Crotch's balled fist drove the balance back into his throat and Jamison teetered crazily on his feet and toppled into the hole. Goss was at his side slugging Maddix. A few moments later they had both men on their faces, their arms laced behind with their own belts.

"I figure it'll be safer to haul them on board until we get our barges in tow," Crotch ventured. He lifted his voice in a yell for his deckhands.

While they were trotting toward them over the landing strip, Goss asked curiously,

"What do you figure blew them out of this hole?"

"Why, Linda! Firecrackers—good, old-fashioned Chinese firecrackers! Six-inchers, at least. She tossed them into the gully from the texas."

He made a gesture with his hand and Goss peered over the bank. What he saw was a slim figure in a silk kimono standing beside the rail topside. While he stared she lifted her arm in greeting. From the tips of her fingers shone the red glow of punk.

Crotch's mouth broke into a wolfish grin. "It's not bad—I figure we're whittlin' Navigation down by one packet beached. We get our barges back and we keep them as long as we've got guts enough to make the contract stick. Besides that I'm holding Captain Jamison and Captain Maddix until they hand me five-hundred to boot for damages to the *General Heath*. We'll have other fights, likely. But we'll always end up with our fangs in Jamison's throat."

Privately he thought that leveling the odds more than this would take the entire spice out of fighting. This wasn't bad—not bad at all! • • •

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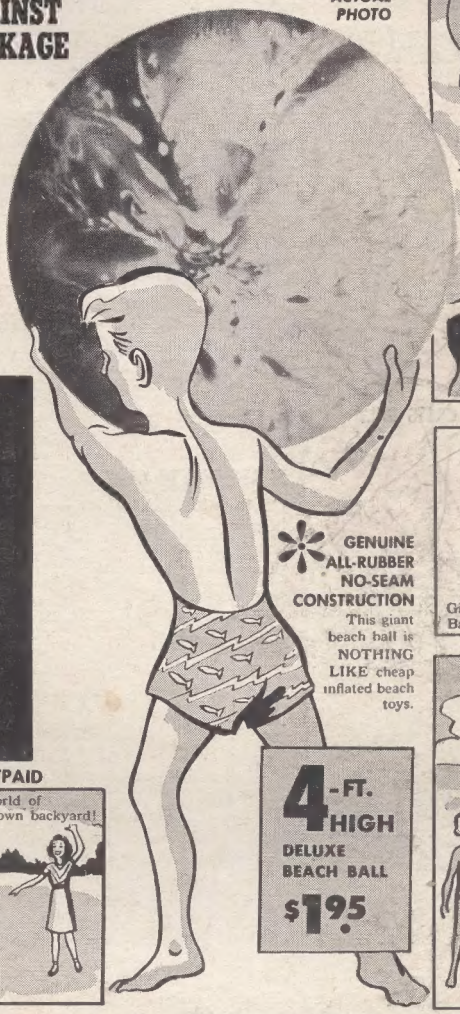

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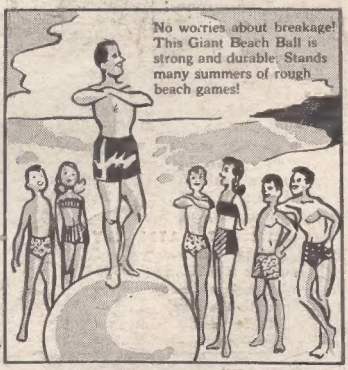

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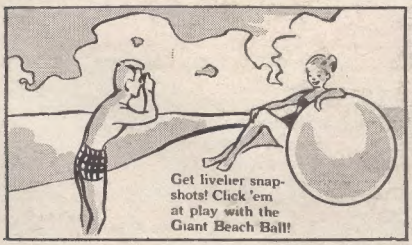

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